

# **Doing it by the Book: The Uses of Paratext in Creating Expectation and Determining Structural Genre in Contemporary British Fiction**

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## Abstract

My thesis is engaged – creatively and critically – in theorising the paratext of hybrid works which fall in the boundary space between a novel and a collection of short stories, and in charting how the production and reception of such works relates to perceived commercial pressure in the British publishing industry. It offers a methodological suggestion for identifying and approaching structural genre boundaries through a sliding scale of monotextual and polytextual signifiers; identifying the levels of narrative unity within the printed, bound book.

Presented in two parts, my thesis aims to mimic the iterative reading experience – each part enhancing and developing the content of the other – which it identifies as key to the hybridity of the books under discussion. Part one contains the critical component and Part two presents my research in the form of an original, hybrid work of fiction titled *Steal This Book*.

### Part one

Chapter one introduces the key critical concepts of paratext, monotext, polytext, and structural genre in the frame of reference of British fiction. Chapter two addresses the historical precedents of marketplace dictating form in British publishing. Chapter three offers a unique perspective on how closer examinations of paratext can assist writers, readers and critics in the digital age. Chapter four examines the position of the reader in relation to hybrid fiction and Chapter five demonstrates a variety of different paratextual forms, structures, and methods which British writers are using today.

### Part two

*Steal This Book* provides a distinct commentary through example, representing the practical effects of paratext through its own structure. In the five interlinked narratives both the thematic and the character-driven story arcs aim to straddle the boundary space between short story collection and novel, expanding on the structurally-driven theorising of Part one by demonstrating the necessity of structure coming second to story in order to provide a satisfying read.

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>PART ONE</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter one</b>	<b>3</b>
State of the nation	6
Losing the plot	14
Sectioning the book	19
<b>Chapter two</b>	<b>24</b>
The historical marketplace	26
Brand before beauty	32
Text appeal	40
<b>Chapter three</b>	<b>61</b>
Antisocial networking	62
Reality bytes	69
Back to the future	77
<b>Chapter four</b>	<b>82</b>
The death of genre	83
Cycle paths	86
Peri(lous)text	90
<b>Chapter five</b>	<b>102</b>
Between the covers	103
Getting seri(es)ous	112
Separation anxiety	119
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>123</b>
<b>Works cited</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>PART TWO</b>	<b>138</b>
<b><i>Steal This Book</i></b>	<b>140</b>
Induction	142
1. Dr Leah Beaufort Steps Out	195
2. Jacob's Other Stories	259
3. Erica Writes Her Wrongs	326
Epitaph	367
<b>Appendix A</b>	<b>390</b>
<b>Appendix B</b>	<b>429</b>
<b>Appendix C</b>	<b>461</b>

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## Preface

Several years ago I was introduced to – and fell in love with – Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1966). Aside from the fluidity and poignancy of the prose itself, the structure of the book and the modes of narration within it caught my interest and started an itch of an idea.

*The Master and Margarita* has an epigraph taken from Goethe's *Faust* (1808). The text is divided into two parts: book one and book two. Book one is broken down into eighteen numbered, titled chapters; book two into fourteen numbered, titled chapters and an epilogue. The chapters in both books interweave a supernaturally-infested 1930s Moscow and the Jerusalem of Pontius Pilate. The latter is introduced variously as a story told by the Satanic Woland, a work of fiction written by the eponymous master (both narrated by him and as a written text) and a dream by the poet Ivan Ponyrev. The narrative veracity of the Pilate sections is questioned and reinforced through being presented by multiple, potentially unreliable sources. While the Moscow/Supernatural chapters reference and contain fragments from the Pilate chapters – acknowledging the Pilate narrative as both a concept and a material *mise en scène* text – the latter contains no reference to the former. The Pilate chapters are entirely autonomous rather than physically framed within the Moscow/Supernatural chapters, for example when one of the Moscow/Supernatural chapters ends with an opening sentence from the following Pilate chapters, the latter repeats this sentence rather than following on from where the

preceding chapter left off. As such, the Pilate chapters could feasibly be collated and read as a separate work.

The devices used to present these two narrative strands as both linked and independent caught my imagination – the juxtaposition of the chapters’ events, the continuation of voice between the Pilate sections despite the supposedly different sources of narration, the lack of edification as to the necessity of knowing or not-knowing – and made me think about how and when certain information is presented to the reader. This led me on to questions about the boundaries between short stories and novels, the effect of collation, and the assumptions we make as writers, readers and critics, and the necessity or otherwise of clear structural genre definitions. I became particularly interested in the ways in which paratext – text which accompanies a printed work, such as a table of contents or a preface – can provide the reader with a framework for interpreting the main text.

That was several years, umpteen books and many drafts ago. The result of my thoughts is this thesis: a hybrid work itself, it presents my research in the form of both critical analysis (Part one) and a work of original fiction titled *Steal This Book* (Part two). It is my hope that the connections – between the analytical chapters of Part one and the creative narratives of Part two, between the five sections of *Steal This Book*, between the primary and secondary texts referenced in Part one – will be clear enough to follow but also obscure enough to provoke further thought.

Approaching the question of paratext primarily as a writer rather than a theorist has at times led me to question if this thesis slips closer to a manual of good practice than

a work of literary criticism. As a result I would like to clarify that it is my intention to raise questions for further discussion rather than to provide any definitive answers, to collate current information which could inform future research, and to produce an engaging piece of original writing which might one day lead someone else to follow questions of their own.

# Part one

**The use of an epigraph is always a mute gesture whose interpretation is left up to the reader.**

Gérard Genette, *Paratexts*

## Chapter one

The first qualification for judging any piece of workmanship from a corkscrew to a cathedral is to know what it is – what it was intended to do, and how it is meant to be used.

C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*

Paratext is both an identifier and reinforcer of intertextual and intratextual links and thus a key – if often subconscious – route into following the plot of full-length works of published fiction.<sup>1</sup> From subtitles to chapter headings, it assists the reader to enter and reposition themselves in the often intricate spatio-temporal world of the narrative. As Gérard Genette puts it, ‘the paratext provides an airlock that helps the reader pass without too much respiratory difficulty from one world to the other, a sometimes delicate operation, especially when the second world is a fictional one.’<sup>2</sup> In his seminal work on the topic, *Paratexts* (1987), Genette lays out a framework for the interpretation of published material through paratext and it is my intention to extend that discussion into the uses of paratext within contemporary British fiction. More specifically, this thesis concentrates on the uses of paratext in determining structural genre within contemporary British fiction (1989-2010) by following recent developments in the reception of single-author short story collections compared to single-author novels in the contemporary British publishing industry. I follow Genette’s categorisation of paratext into epitext and

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<sup>1</sup>For a fuller discussion on the definition of paratext, see the introduction to Gérard Genette’s *Paratexts* (1987).

<sup>2</sup>Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 408.

peritext, where epitext refers to the paratext outside the book and peritext to the paratext within the book.

This thesis proposes that the British short fiction market is flourishing, but in disguised forms which have developed as more suited to a literary community dominated by the novel. This tie between socio-historical context and literary form is a two-way process which has been subject to relatively little academic analysis, despite the fact that, as D F McKenzie succinctly puts it, ‘the forms themselves encode the history of their production.’<sup>3</sup> While recent years have seen a burst of academic activity in the fields of book history and literary marketing strategies – most notably Claire Squire’s *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (2007), which highlights the role of the marketplace in developing and defining literary genres – none of this has analysed the role which collated short fiction plays in the contemporary British publishing industry. In the following five chapters I attempt to bridge existing gaps in critical analysis of hybrid fiction through an analysis of the uses of paratext in creating reader expectation.

In this chapter I introduce the key concepts and issues explored in Part one of this thesis. I start by explaining the structure of the thesis itself. I then cover the reasons behind my focus on British fiction. Next, I discuss my views on iterative reading processes and their relationship to collated stories. Finally, I introduce my methodological approach and the key terminology of ‘monotext’ and ‘polytext’ and the sliding scale devised as a way of identifying and understanding the hybridity of the books

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<sup>3</sup>D F McKenzie, *What’s Past Is Prologue* (London: Hearthstone Publications, 1993)

under discussion through a categorisation of the connections between their multiple diegetic levels.

As I explain at length in Chapter two, the historical marketplace for British literature has shaped contemporary views on the commercial viability of the short story collection compared to the novel and had a reciprocal effect on the attitudes of readers and writers. Chapter three addresses the purposes of surveying and consolidating current uses of paratext in reading printed fiction in order to provide a solid basis for understanding the challenges facing writers, editors, publishers and readers as the publishing industry engages with the new digital opportunities. In Chapter four I discuss the necessity of determining structural genre through paratext in order to create accurate expectation in readers of hybrid works of fiction. In Chapter five I conclude Part one through an examination of the different forms, structures and methods which contemporary British writers are using in their published works.

In Appendix A I provide a basic structural breakdown of the main primary texts examined in the first section of the thesis. These are based on the editions listed in the bibliography, arranged alphabetically by author and subdivided chronologically by date of first publication. This breakdown is intended as a quick and easy guide to the basic structure of the paratext of the books, in particular to draw attention to the patterns of paratext use in each author's *oeuvre*. Unless specified, the breakdown does not include untitled chapterlets or the graphics used to separate them and should always be considered a rough alternative to looking at a copy of the book in question. Appendix B contains transcripts of four interviews carried out in 2009 and 2010, referenced in the



first section of the thesis. Appendix C contains three fictional documents intended to extend the diegeses of *Steal This Book*.

The focus on structural genre in the analytical sections of this thesis has led naturally to what Genette calls a rhematic rather than thematic reading of the texts under discussion: focussing on the form of the work itself rather than its content and subject matter.<sup>4</sup> The work of hybrid fiction – *Steal This Book* – in Part two is intended to demonstrate that the liminal function of a book's paratext serves to reinforce the thematic links between sections. As Henry James puts it in 'The Art of Fiction' (1948), '[t]he story and the novel, the idea and the form, are the needle and thread, and I never heard of a guild of tailors who recommended the use of the thread without the needle, or the needle without the thread.'<sup>5</sup> The two Parts of this thesis are designed to be read iteratively: Part two acting as a commentary on the respective importance of rhematic and thematic approaches to individual books.

### **State of the nation**

The history of the novel in Britain is linked intrinsically to the invention of the printing press and the emergence of capitalism as the dominant economic force since, as Ian Watt notes in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), '[t]he novel is perhaps the only literary genre

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<sup>4</sup>Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 78.

<sup>5</sup>Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', *The Art of Fiction and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 3-23 (p. 18).

which is essentially connected with the medium of print.’<sup>6</sup> Robert Alter echoes this view in *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (1975) when he points out that:

The novel as a genre provides a specially instructive measure of a culture caught up in the dynamics of its own technological instruments because it is the only major genre that comes into being after the invention of printing and its own development – structural or thematic as well as economic – is intimately tied up with printing.<sup>7</sup>

These economic and industrial factors surrounding the rise of the novel to literary pre-eminence in Britain have influenced almost every major work on the history and theory of the novel, as discussed in Leslie Fiedler’s essay ‘The Death and Rebirth of the Novel’ (1974) in which Fiedler states that ‘[t]he printing press was, of course, the first mass-production device in our culture; and the novel was the first literary form invented to be reproduced by Gutenberg means.’<sup>8</sup> However, the inception of the mass-produced and mass-disseminated modern novel lay not in the form of a book as we now know it, but through the magazine markets. Novels were written as ongoing serialisations, and their length and composition therefore differed drastically from the novel as we now know it – conceived and bound as a single piece. Novels written in sections to meet publication demands – be it daily instalments in newspapers or monthly sections in magazines – were subject to diverse market forces which controlled both composition and production. The public read the novels in these sectioned forms, and alongside them they read a plethora

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<sup>6</sup>Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1957), p. 196.

<sup>7</sup>Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup>Leslie A. Fiedler, ‘The Death and Rebirth of the Novel’, *The Theory of the Novel: New Essays*, ed. John Halperin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974). Pp. 189-209, (p. 190).

of fiction of varying lengths from the anecdote to the novella, the short story to the epic saga. This had a direct effect on the ways in which fiction was composed, structured and presented to the public since – as James L. W. West III's research has demonstrated – '[a]uthors who were interested in selling serial rights needed to write their novels with serialisation in mind from the beginning, taking care to structure the narrative in instalments suitable for monthly magazine publication.'<sup>9</sup> These economic market factors led to a wide audience – and therefore demand – for magazine fiction since '[u]rbanization, growth in average income, better public education, and an increase in leisure time combined to produce a ready audience for magazines that published popular fiction' and there was a wide variety of magazines catering for their reader's taste in fiction from low-brow romance and murder tales to high quality literature.<sup>10</sup>

While our contemporary views of fiction are focussed on the concept of the book – the production costs of which prohibit publishing under a certain number of words (usually 70,000-60,000 for literary fiction, although certain genres such as children's fiction and romance may be 40,000-50,000) between the covers – when modern fiction became an economic powerhouse with the invention of the printing press, fiction was written in all shades of length and content, with the categorising into short story, novella, novelette and novel coming after rather than before the fact. The origins of the novel come in sections, in serials, in chapters and volumes rather than in the all-encompassing, all-prevalent book. As Robert D. Mayo comments, '[the Eighteenth] Century is usually

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<sup>9</sup>James L.W. West III, 'The Magazine Market', *The Book History Reader* ed. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 269-276, (p. 272).

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, p. 267.

thought of as belonging in a large part to the novel, but approached through the magazines it is an age of tiny tales and diminutive narrative sketches [...]. In fact, many of the so-called novelettes of the magazines are merely short stories that have strayed, so to speak, into a higher bracket,' demonstrating that both long and short prose fiction are intrinsically linked with their means of production.<sup>11</sup> Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, technological advances in print production began to escalate.<sup>12</sup> Concurrently, personal income increased, paper became cheaper and more people could afford to purchase their own books. Expectations of the novel moved from print-media serialisation to become more closely linked with bound books, initially as three-decker volumes in the nineteenth century, then in the twentieth century as single volumes when the paperback became the dominant mass-produced and circulated form. The magazine market became the domain of the short story, where it was a commercial money-spinner for many fledgling writers, notably in the USA with writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway earning unprecedented fees for single stories. The novel and the short story divided into separate economic regions of the publishing industry, each to the medium best suited for their length. As the two genres developed their own markets, so critical writing on the separate genres became focussed on the differences between the genres rather than their shared heritage.

While print production became cheaper, faster and more technologically advanced, the demands of the marketplace were also shifting. The market for short stories

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<sup>11</sup>Robert D. Mayo, *The English Novel in the Magazine: 1740-1815* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 4.

<sup>12</sup>For an in depth discussion of the history of book production in this period, see *The Book History Reader* (2002), ed. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery.

in magazines reached its peak when the American magazine *Life* (1936-1972) published Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) and sold 5,300,000 copies in two days. Since then the number of commercial magazines featuring fiction has declined drastically. A cursory examination of the *Writer and Artists Yearbook 2008* (2007) reveals a small British market for romantic and erotic short fiction in magazines, and a handful of literary magazines with small distribution networks. The only high-profile magazine publishing short fiction in late 2007 was *Prospect*, including one commissioned story from an established writer per issue. Few of the major broadsheets or tabloids accepted short fiction on a regular basis; a notable exception being the serialisation of Alexander McCall Smith's *44 Scotland Street* series in *The Scotsman*. During the course of researching and writing this thesis, the impact of the Save Our Short Story campaign has begun to filter through – for example, the founding of the high-profile BBC National Short Story award in 2005, followed by the Sunday Times EFG Private Bank Short Story Award in 2009. Initiatives such as *The Guardian*'s summer fiction special insert and the publication of commissioned work by major literary figures in *The Times* have raised the profile of the short story, but are not widespread enough to be a guaranteed income stream for professional writers; competitions can only be won by one person and commissions go to established names. While they have provided opportunities for the publication of single stories – such as publishing longlisted entries online and shortlisted entries in print – the Nineteenth century culture of serialisation has almost entirely disappeared. Since there is little to no demand for serialised novels, the composition and

structure of novel writing has changed drastically since the inception of print. As Jerome McGann notes:

[A] novel written for weekly serial publication [...] is not merely *written* differently from one that is written for monthly circulation (or for no serial publication at all); it is *produced* differently and comes into the reader's view via differently defined bibliographical structures of meaning.<sup>13</sup> [italics in original]

Novels are now composed as autonomous pieces, designed to be printed and bound in one volume before reading. Just as the death of the magazine market heralded a decline in the commercial and therefore the literary value of the short story, changes in publishing in light of the digital age could have a significant impact on the status of the novel as the pre-eminent literary form in contemporary society since, as Fiedler has noted, '[The novel's] fate depends on the machine and the marketplace.'<sup>14</sup>

Although digital technologies have enabled the establishment of new markets for both long and short fiction – as I discuss in Chapter three – the lack of the editorial sifting process associated with traditional print publishing makes it difficult to judge the quality of the work being published on the internet. This echoes the conception of the magazine market at the beginning of the industrial age in Britain when '[f]iction of some sort was found in four hundred and seventy different periodicals published between 1740 and 1815.'<sup>15</sup> After 1815 the role of the editor and the concept of the professional author in literary society helped increase the quality of work being published at the higher end of the market. Internet and self publishing often lack this mediating role, and it is telling that

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<sup>13</sup>Jerome McGann, 'The Socialisation of Texts' *The Book History Reader* ed. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 39-46, (p. 45). Italics in original.

<sup>14</sup>Fiedler, p.190.

<sup>15</sup>Mayo, p .2.

they have a negligible impact on commercial sales of fiction. So it is that the main commercial impact remains – for the moment – with the printed book and, as Nicole Ward Jouve has noted, ‘[t]he problem of the short story today at any rate is that its length does not fit the format of the book.’<sup>16</sup>

The increasing international dominance of English in a wide variety of fields has been, as noted by Eric De Bellaigue, ‘reinforced by the role of New York and London as the two outstanding international centres of financial expertise and more generally the position the two countries enjoy in the dissemination of information.’<sup>17</sup> The role of short fiction in establishing an independent American culture has been well documented in works such as Andrew Levy’s *The Culture and Commerce of the American Short Story* (1995) and James Nagels’ *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* (2001) and as such it holds a different commercial and academic position than in Britain, where the cultural shadow of the nineteenth century novel still falls long over cultural appreciation of other literary forms. As a leading UK literary agent put it in a recent interview, ‘[w]e have been enslaved by the novel in the UK: it has been the predominant literary form and that has increased over the last twenty years.’<sup>18</sup> To the wider market for individual stories in high-impact publications such as *The New Yorker* and the greater number of high profile short story writing literary giants both past – for example Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Cheever – and present – for example Dave Eggers, Lorrie Moore and Junot Diaz – there

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<sup>16</sup>Ward Jouve, p. 36.

<sup>17</sup>Eric De Bellaigue, *British Book Publishing as a Business Since the 1960s*, (London: The British Library, 2004), p. 1.

<sup>18</sup>Jane Smith, ‘Interview 1 – Jane Smith’, 10 December 2009, Appendix B.

is a distinct commercial market for short fiction collections and anthologies in North America – especially the United States – which lacks an equivalent in Britain. The short fiction which contributed to the creation of a post-independence American identity has been the subject of a large number of academic studies, and subsequently short fiction theory has grown and developed around these studies. The majority of short fiction theorists today are not only based in the United States, but draw their examples from American literature and society.<sup>19</sup> There are comparatively few studies which focus exclusively on British short fiction, presumably due to its perceived lower commercial status and relevance in the contemporary British publishing industry. Current attempts to rehabilitate the status of short fiction in Britain suggest that this pejorative perception is due to external factors rather than a poor quality of output in the field of British short fiction.<sup>20</sup>

In *British Short Fiction in the Early Nineteenth Century: The Rise of the Tale* (2008), Tim Killick gives a clear and concise overview of the establishment of printed forms of prose fiction – both bound and unbound – and the rise of what is commonly referred to as the modern short story. He notes that in America, ‘the lack of international copyright regulations and the consequent unavailability of cheap, pirated British novels, meant that magazine short fiction could offer a more solid foundation for a literary career

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<sup>19</sup>Charles E. May, ‘Brief Bibliography of Short Story Criticism and Theory’, *Reading the Short Story* <<http://may-on-the-short-story.blogspot.com/2009/03/brief-bibliography-of-short-story.html>>, [accessed 26 January 2011].

<sup>20</sup>For a full analysis of these external factors, see ‘The Short Story in the UK: Overview of the current state and exploration of opportunities for new initiatives’, ed. Jenny Brown Associates with Book Marketing Limited, March 2004, <<http://www.theshortstory.org.uk/aboutus/history.php4>>, [accessed 26 January 2011].



than novel-writing' whereas in Britain, 'in all likelihood the novel did push short fiction aside.'<sup>21</sup> In his discussion of the initial reception of varying prose forms, Killick notes that 'negative connotations still dogged the novel' leading to a wide popularity for works designated as 'Tales' the latter taking up thirty-four percent of fiction titles as late as the 1820s.<sup>22</sup> Subsequent changes in printing technology and the rise of the circulating library are credited with the eventual shift in public opinion in favour of the novel; Killick demonstrates in his analysis that 'short fiction in its collected form was in direct competition with the increasingly prestigious novel' in comparison with the separate popularity enjoyed by short fiction published as autonomous pieces.<sup>23</sup> He concludes the main thrust of his argument as 'that short fiction in the early nineteenth century was, to a large degree, defined by its market' an assertion which this thesis aims to demonstrate is still true of both short and long prose fiction today and shall address in further detail in the following chapter.<sup>24</sup>

### **Losing the plot**

The inherent satisfaction of pattern recognition is one of the key layers of interest in reading fiction. The constructions of narratives are poised between keeping 'what happens next' consistent with 'what has already happened' without lapsing into dull cliché or unnecessary implausibility. In a discussion on the narrative processes of

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<sup>21</sup>Tim Killick, *British Short Fiction in the Early Nineteenth Century: The Rise of the Tale*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008), p. 15.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, p. 33.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, p. 162.

videogames and television sitcoms in *Everything Bad Is Good For You* (2005), Steven Johnson claims that correctly identifying the internal patterns of fictional narratives activates the reward section of the brain, releasing dopamine and enhancing the pleasure of the reading experience.<sup>25</sup> These patterns come in many different forms, but this thesis concentrates on the paratext of fiction as an almost subliminal layer of the pattern recognition experience.

As the printed book is a static, predetermined narrative experience, the reader is without the power to make decisions or enact changes which either affect or effect the fictional narratives they are reading. The reader derives their levels of satisfaction through the process of anticipation, whether that is ultimately anticipation subverted or anticipation fulfilled. Certain types of text – Metafiction, for example – will provide a more challenging reading experience, allowing the reader to choose to engage on different levels and play a more active role in deciphering meaning. However, even these texts are technically static: unlike a videogame or a build-your-own kit, the reader does not determine the phrasing of a sentence or the fate of a character.

Research into the state of the short story in Britain carried out in 2004 identified one in six readers saying that ‘short stories are harder to read than their usual books.’<sup>26</sup> This could be because they are approaching the book as a unified text. Rather than

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<sup>25</sup>Steven Johnson, *Everything Bad Is Good For You: How Popular Culture Is Making Us Smarter* (London: Allen Lane, 2005, repr. London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 37-67.

<sup>26</sup>‘The Short Story in the UK: Overview of the current state and exploration of opportunities for new initiatives’, ed. Jenny Brown Associates with Book Marketing Limited, March 2004, <<http://www.theshortstory.org.uk/aboutus/history.php4>>, [accessed 26 January 2011], p. iv.

entering into the alternative fictional reality of one fiction, enjoying it, coming back into the real world, having a break and then moving onto the next fiction another time, they're trying to read the stories one after another, like the chapters of a novel. Continually having to re-engage with new characters, new themes, new styles, new settings and new plots, the reader can get confused, alienated and mentally over stimulated. This is why fiction in magazines is more popular: according to the 2004 research carried out by Jenny Brown Associates, half of those who would not read a collection of short fiction actively enjoy reading short fiction in magazines. In the magazine setting, the autonomous nature of the fiction is emphasised. Bound in a book, the reader automatically associates the volume with a unified whole, and seeks a linearity of pattern recognition from the first page to the last.

The expectation of an arc of unity pulling together the contents of a printed, bound book is echoed within each individual story in a collection: the autonomy of each story is more important than the autonomy of the collection as a whole. In his discussion on the intertitles of books, Genette skirts over the topic of short story collections and their effect on the reader when he states:

I will not further try the patience of my unlikely reader by proposing a new ramble through the intertitles of other “genres”, such as collections of novellas or essays. Besides, these types of collections are too recent to introduce any very significant diversity into a survey whose main lesson seems to me by now fairly clear.<sup>27</sup>

It is the intention of this thesis to fill in that gap through an attempt at examining the expectation built in the reader by the paratext of hybrid fiction. If a reader is led to believe that the book they are about to read contains a clear arc of unity and is then

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<sup>27</sup>Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 315.

confronted by a multitude of disconnecting arcs, then their reading experience is bound to be unsatisfactory. It is necessary to consider what good paratextual practice might be in the grey boundary areas between short story collections and novels so that the reader can be gently guided in an expected direction and gain maximum satisfaction from the experience.

The links between the sections of hybrid works of fiction often lend themselves to an iterative reading approach: the connections between the narrative arcs of the individual sections may create a tangential, subtle relationship which enhances the reading experience. The information passed between the sections can add to the process of pattern recognition, allowing the reader to feel satisfied about recognising themes and side-characters, and allowing them to settle more quickly and easily into the diegesis of a new narrative.

The visual pattern of paratext within the book can be used to both enhance this sense of connection between sections and – conversely – to prevent the reader from attempting to forge links between narratives where a connection would be a hindrance to the introduction of, for example, new themes. While the stories in a collection of short fiction may have been originally devised as individual pieces, works of hybrid fiction are devised as books rather than segments: while sections may have the potential for autonomous existence, they have been designed to be read in conjunction with the other sections. In an interview in 2010 about her most recent book, *How to Paint a Dead Man* (2009), Sarah Hall said:

I would not have considered publishing the sections separately and they certainly do not qualify as short stories, which are technically very different entities. I think

the stories lend themselves to fragmentation and splicing – it benefits and builds the drama to move in and out of each.<sup>28</sup>

Hall goes on to discuss the connections between the four spliced narrative sections of *HTPADM*, saying that ‘perhaps it is more satisfying to let a reader draw his or her own patterns and meanings from a lightly linked text’ and that her ‘hope is that each chapter offers help, context, or a philosophical chime/communication, for the reading of future chapters.’<sup>29</sup> In a discussion of her views on the difference between short stories and the separate narratives of *HTPADM*, Hall describes the latter as ‘looser entities which are dependent on each other for greater meaning and enlivenment’: their interest for the reader is balanced between the actions within the narrative itself and the relation of those actions to the other narratives.<sup>30</sup>

The paratext of *HTPADM* is consistent and descriptive; Hall says that ‘Titles are very important to me’ and goes on to describe them as ‘seduction tools.’<sup>31</sup> She sees the intertitles of *HTPADM* as ‘ways of marking whose work, whose story, we are about to re-enter or re-gain each time we get to a new chapter. They also summarize what is happening in each story and they give each story its own literary distinction.’<sup>32</sup> Without the co-ordinating role played by Hall’s intertitles, the reader could easily become confused by the movement between different narrators, settings, locations and time periods. However, with the reassurance of being clearly located, the reader is allowed to enjoy detecting how the plot of each narrative thread will play out, alongside the guessing

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<sup>28</sup>Sarah Hall, ‘Interview 3 – Sarah Hall’ in Appendix B.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

game of how the threads connect across geographical and temporal boundaries: the twists of plot in one narrative section have a direct impact on the reader's comprehension of the other narrative sections.

### **Sectioning the book**

Yury Tynyanov distinguishes the novel from short fiction through a discussion of the differing expectations built up by awareness of length, stating that '[o]ur expectations of a "large form" are not the same as of a small form: depending on the size of the construction, each detail, each stylistic device, has a different function, a different force, and a different load is laid upon it.'<sup>33</sup> These stylistic differences relate to structuring techniques, not thematic content. Essentially, fictional prose narratives can be placed on a sliding scale which encompasses both their length and the context of their presentation, and given critical attention accordingly. This thesis proposes the concept of a sliding scale by which a book-length work of fiction can be analysed according to the ways in which is divided by both paratext – such as chapter headings – and also on a more discrete level by the emphasis given to the connection between the diegetic levels of these divisions.

In order to differentiate between one end of the scale and the other, I use the term 'monotext' to refer to works which operate on one diegetic level, present a single arc of unity, and use divisions within the text for the sole purpose of allowing the reader a

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<sup>33</sup>Yury Tynyanov, 'The Literary Fact' in *Modern Genre Theory* ed. David Duff (Singapore: Longman, 2000). pp. 29-49, (p. 32).

digestive breathing space rather than to signify a change in reading experience. Conversely, I use the term ‘polytext’ to refer to works which are composite: containing myriad beginnings and endings, and lacking the sustained threads of connection which start and end a monotext. Thus, a ‘traditional’ novel would be considered monotextual and a traditional collection of short stories would be considered polytextual: their exact placement on the scale depending on the assets of the individual book in question, with the hybrid works which this thesis focuses upon clustering in the middle of the scale. A book with distinct storylines built around separate characters would not necessarily be polytextual: the relationship between the different sections can indicate that they are supposed to be read in conjunction with each other rather than as separate pieces.

Similarly, a single short story not presented in the juxtaposition of a collection – for example, in a Penguin Mini Modern Classics published as part of their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2011 – could be situated towards the monotextual end of the scale, its autonomous status asserted through being bound individually. As I discuss in the following chapters, ‘long works clearly involve different processes of comprehension than short ones readable in a sitting’ and individually bound short stories still present a different reading experience than longer works.<sup>34</sup> However, the focus of this thesis is on the effect of collating shorter works rather than debating at what point an autonomous short story becomes a novella, becomes a novel, becomes an epic. As Gary Saul Morson points out in a discussion on the impulses behind narrative storytelling, time

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<sup>34</sup>Gary Saul Morson, ‘Foreword: Intelligence and the Storytelling Process’, *Tell Me a Story: Narrative and Intelligence* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990; repr. 2000), pp. ix-xl, (p. xiv).

‘accumulates both for the character who grows and for the reader who lives the work and an outside life together.’ and it is the effect of this prolonged contact between reader and book – the reflective possibilities of engaging in a considerable body of prose – which this thesis is interested in theorising.<sup>35</sup>

When someone opens a book of fiction and begins to read, they cross a threshold into a new world. The rules of this new world are open to exploration, but at the point of entry the reader engages in a contract with the text, expecting to get a certain experience in return for the investment of time and money involved in accessing and consuming a book. When confronted with something unexpected, a reader’s reaction can be equally difficult to predict. For example, David Mitchell’s bestselling book *Cloud Atlas* (2004) breaks off mid-sentence, switches between literary genres, and plays games with the reader’s comprehension of fact-within-fiction. As Claire Squires notes in *Marketing Literature* (2007), ‘Mitchell’s pyrotechnics had reviewers rummaging through their critical vocabulary in order to describe the structure of *Cloud Atlas* and to express their verdict upon it.’<sup>36</sup> Not only ‘difficult’ to read, the book’s multivariant structure made it difficult to condense for the purposes of reviews. Squires sees the commercial success of *Cloud Atlas* as ‘a demonstration of how, in the globalised corporate world of early twenty-first century publishing, complex literary fiction can also sell extremely well, and appeal to a large number of readers, given the forceful interventions of marketing.’<sup>37</sup> The commercial results of reader awareness of epitext is examined in greater depth in the

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid, p. xxii.

<sup>36</sup>Claire Squires, *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 172.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid, p. 175.



following chapter, but suffice to say briefly here that thanks to this marketing campaign the majority of readers picking up *Cloud Atlas* did so with a vague awareness that the book was in some way faceted differently from what is commonly termed a novel. They crossed the threshold with a heightened expectation that they would need to pay closer attention than usual to paratextual signposts such as intertitles in order to understand and enjoy the book: they were already expecting to slip down the scale from a monotextual to a polytextual experience.

A reader expects different things from a piece of short fiction than from a novel. They expect any resolution to come quickly in the former, and slowly in the latter; they're more alert to notice repetitions and co-incidences in short fiction; in greater need of sign posts and reminders in the novel. They invest in them differently. The reader enters into an alternative, fictional reality: in short fiction they leave that diegesis relatively quickly: the world of the story is visited briefly, and more is left unsaid than explained in full. When entering the world of the novel, the reader receives a fuller exposition of the alternative reality. Since the novel is taken in over a longer period of time, there is more scope to acclimatise oneself and grow accustomed to the ways and methods of the alternative, fictional reality. The reader enters and leaves both the world of the novel and the world of short fictions through the same doors: prose and print, but the experience of being there is different, the memory of the experience is also different.

If the difference between a novel and a collection of short stories can be seen as lying in the separation of the alternative reality between sections of the book, then – as I discuss in Chapter four – the ways in which the author has divided the sections provides

the key for the different stages of fictional prose on the sliding scale, using structuring and sectioning devices such as titles and individual cover pages to both create intratextual connections and enforce breaks in the text. In the following chapter I examine the relationship between form and marketplace in the contemporary British publishing industry and the effect this has on the presentation of hybrid fiction.

## Chapter two

Genre, as well as being created and reflected by the book itself, by branding, by imprints and by retail practice, is crucially influenced by the interventions of wider agencies, such as literary prizes. In addition to being an integrated and integral part of the publishing industry's business practice, marketing therefore operates via a range of publishing activities and publishing intermediaries in order to represent books and authors in the literary marketplace. In so doing, it actively influences reception, negotiates with genre and constructs and reshapes notions of literary value and taste.

Claire Squires, *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain*

The material aspect of the book plays an important role in the reader's experience of the text contained within, from the ease of reading the material due to the typesetting, to the expectation created by the cover-design. Since its inception, the printed and bound book has adapted alongside the demands of society and the possibilities accorded by technological advances. Laura J. Miller's research into the cultural changes behind the contemporary retail environment show that 'a culture of consumption is far from a new phenomenon, but it has consolidated over the last half century as a population with more discretionary income than in the past has been confronted with a surfeit of consumption opportunities.'<sup>38</sup> For example, popular, mass-produced paperback editions rose to prominence due to the post-war generation's wider education, larger disposable incomes and greater amounts of leisure time, alongside technological advances which allowed cheaper mass production and distribution to bring bound literature into the homes of the majority of the population as possessions rather than 'borrowed' items via the radio or library.<sup>39</sup> The paperback revolution may have come from the fall in printing costs and

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<sup>38</sup>Laura J. Miller, *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 15.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

increased demand for full-length books of all genres, but it precipitated – alongside other factors such as mass ownership of television sets – the demise of the un-bound literary publication which had been a prominent and lucrative industry since at least the early nineteenth century.

As British magazine culture diminished in the post-war era, it took with it the most profitable and most widely distributed market for short fiction in its autonomous state: published as individual pieces rather than in collections. Shorter pieces became collated in response to a market where only book length prose was commercially viable. Due to the cultural dominance of the novel in Britain, various narrative and marketing strategies have become more widely developed, drawing on a long literary tradition whereby the physical juxtaposition of texts automatically encourages the reader to find connections between them. Both the overt and the subtle connections between pieces collected and bound into a single volume change the resonance of the fiction: the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts – something I go into in greater depth in Chapter four — and the unified, hybrid text becomes an identifiably separate structural genre from either short fiction or the novel. Examples of hybrid works occur throughout literary history, for example Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1353) and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). However, it is the contention of this thesis that the current lack of mass-disseminated, commercially profitable publishing outlets for short fiction in its autonomous form has led to a proliferation of such titles being published and marketed as novels, rather than as hybrid or collected works. This thesis aims to demonstrate the social impact of failing to correctly label hybrid works, both in the

perpetuation of the novel-centric literary industry and through the impact on reader-expectation leading to an unsatisfactory engagement with the text. Through a necessarily brief examination of the production and reception of different forms of prose fiction by the contemporary British publishing industry, this thesis hopes to both add to existing theoretical work in producing a methodology for approaching hybrid forms, and consider the wider engagement of the text with society. This chapter explores the relationship between marketplace and form in British literature, with a focus on the diminishing markets for the short story in comparison to the cultural hegemony of the novel. It ends with an in depth analysis of two authors – David Mitchell and Kate Atkinson – who have had both critical and commercial success despite their use of unusual structuring devices, which are traditionally viewed as making it difficult to attract and retain a wide readership and – therefore – high sales figures.

### **The Historical Marketplace**

Printed and bound books have been in mass circulation in their contemporary formats since at least the 1830s.<sup>40</sup> In these early days of mass-readership, the high production costs and subsequent high retail prices of these books led to circulating and subscription libraries playing an important role in the dissemination of fiction, allowing those unable to afford their own books access to texts for entertainment as well as autodidacticism. It continued the sense of social reverence for the book itself, despite mixed views on the

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<sup>40</sup>For a more detailed reading of this period of book history see Tim Killick's *British Short Fiction in the Early Nineteenth Century: The Rise of the Tale* (2008).

quality of the content. In contrast, other forms of print culture such as newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets were both cheaper and faster to produce, and their retail prices were subsidised through the selling of advertising space. The overt connections with non-literary industries and the association with the disposability of the form itself led to a lesser cultural value being connected with the content of these unbound publications as well as their form.

In his centenary lecture to the Bibliographical Society in 1992, D. F. McKenzie discussed an experiment he regularly sets for his students, involving a blank book with neither text nor jacket; ‘I ask the class to tell me what kind of text the blank book was designed for, and to date it. They invariably get it right, and yet there’s not a word, a single linguistic sign, to guide them.’<sup>41</sup> In his extemporisation on the emphasis society puts on the form of printed material in assigning it both an interpretation and a value, McKenzie highlights the role that preconceptions of genre play in our approach to literature by pointing out that ‘the forms themselves, having been conventionally established for the genre, will determine also its length, production costs, retail price, and readership—and therefore its vocabulary, narrative structure, and characters.’<sup>42</sup> The cheap materials commonly employed by print media therefore cheapen by association any literature printed within, as even the most low-brow and poorly written literary endeavour is given a certain sense of credibility through publication in a bound format.

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<sup>41</sup>D. F. McKenzie, *What’s Past is Prologue* (London: Hearthstone Publications, 1993), p. 4.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid*, p. 6.

The effect of demand on form can be seen in the changing markets of the mid-nineteenth century which established the cultural weight of the novel that still predominates in the contemporary British publishing industry. De Bellaigue sees the book trade's clear preference for the three volume novel as a key example of marketplace dictating form since writers were subsequently encouraged to produce works to suit it. He cites as a:

[N]ightmare precedent [...] the domination exercised on new fiction by Mudie's Circulating Library in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: not only did Mudie's decree the format ('three-deckers' which helped the profits of a lending business based on volumes lent rather than titles), but also the plots, covered by what was known as 'the young girl standard', and the cover prices set at levels that converted book buyers into borrowers.<sup>43</sup>

Likewise, the 'paperback revolution' of the post-war era – led by Penguin – both came from and initiated public demand.<sup>44</sup> As the digital revolution opens up new technology on both an industrial and a consumer level, it is natural to assume that the changing market pressures will be reflected in evolving literary forms, as discussed in the following chapter.

The globalisation of the book trade and its dominance by multi-national corporations has led to a shift in industry attitudes: a movement towards viewing books as commercial rather than literary products.<sup>45</sup> The collapse of the Net Book Agreement in 1995, the rise of the literary agent and the increasing dominance of marketing strategies –

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<sup>43</sup>De Bellaigue, p. 27.

<sup>44</sup>John Walsh, 'Paperback Revolution', *Independent*, 29 April 2005, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/paperback-revolution-489734.html>>, [accessed 15 December 2008].

<sup>45</sup>Nicole Matthews, 'Introduction', *Judging a Book by Its Cover: Fans, Publishers, Designers, and the Marketing of Fiction*, ed. Nicole Matthews and Nickianne Moody (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), pp. xi-xxxi, (p. xiv).

such as author branding – has affected acquisition and distribution processes, potentially limiting public access to a wide variety of high-quality texts from a diverse authorship. Taking the collapse of the Net Book Agreement as an example De Bellaigue demonstrates the causal effect across the board:

This freedom to discount was of obvious relevance to existing book retailers, chiefly the chains, with Waterstones and W.H. Smith in the van. It also coincided with the flowering of the electronic retailers, notably *Amazon.com*, the one that has proved lastingly successful. Most important of all, perhaps, in terms of their direct and indirect impact, the large supermarkets discovered in books a new marketing tool that offered good margins.<sup>46</sup>

While De Bellaigue concentrates on the British publishing industry post-1960s, Sir Stanley Unwin's *The Truth About Publishing* (1960) shows how the Net Book Agreement affected marketing techniques in Britain prior to this.<sup>47</sup> Unwin speculates on the influence television may come to have in developing the role of the author in the marketing process, noting that:

*Television*—A tremendously influential medium is already publicising books—sometimes through interviews with authors in a topical news item; at others by presenting the people behind the books. But this development is still (1959) in its infancy, and will doubtless grow as the television authorities find out how many more viewers are interested in books and authors than is usually assumed.<sup>48</sup>

Retailers have a strong impact on the selection and production of new titles and Alison Baverstock sees the decisions taken by key accounts such as W H Smith as meaning that

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<sup>46</sup>De Bellaigue, pp. 188-189.

<sup>47</sup>For an in depth discussion of the major changes since the 1960s see Alison Baverstock's *How to Market Books* (2000), in which Baverstock agrees with De Bellaigue's views on the consolidation of interests by publishers, wholesalers and the major book retailing chains.

<sup>48</sup>Unwin, p. 254.



‘publishers are increasingly finding that the imposition of market forces on what they produce and how they go about it is coming from *outside* the organisation.’<sup>49</sup> As I go on to discuss, this directly impacts not only how publishers produce books and therefore the variety of titles made available to the book-buying and book-reading public, but also revenue streams for professional writers.

Gill Davies notes the importance of the marketing department, identifying that ‘[t]oday, marketing is a powerful and essential part of the publishing process, and there will be few houses where marketing colleagues are not heavily involved in the decision to publish a book. In some trade houses, with a strong commercial edge, marketing may have the final word in that decision.’<sup>50</sup> Baverstock sees this as resulting in the ‘squeezing of the mid-list’ due to focus on high selling back-lists and the potential commercial impact of front-list books.<sup>51</sup> However, despite this reduction in authors, De Bellaigue states figures showing explosive growth in number of titles published over the last 20-30 years, despite the fact that ‘the large publishing groups have had a policy for some time of holding or reducing their title output.’<sup>52</sup> In discussion with John Coldstream of *The Daily Telegraph*, De Bellaigue notes that the number of titles being reviewed in newspapers has remained more or less constant from year to year, meaning that ‘a declining percentage of the annual book intake is covered and hence an increasingly

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<sup>49</sup> Alison Baverstock, *How to Market Books* (London: Kogan Page, 2000), p. 15.

<sup>50</sup> Gill Davies, *Book Commissioning and Acquisition* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> Baverstock, p. 37.

<sup>52</sup> De Bellaigue, p. 17.

severe winnowing exercise.’<sup>53</sup> New titles by celebrity and front-list authors are more or less guaranteed review space, as are titles which have for one reason or another excited public curiosity. This results in fewer ‘review-slots’ available, increasing the competition each title faces in gaining widespread epitextual awareness of the publication.

Tania Hershman founded the online short story review website *The Short Review* in 2007, explaining her motivation as ‘it’s not so easy to find reviews of short story collections, especially ones published by small presses. They just don’t get the column inches that novels receive. It’s no wonder they don’t sell as well as novels.’<sup>54</sup> In an interview in 2010 Hershman adds that ‘over the past two and a half years I haven’t seen the situation get better: it is still a noteworthy moment when a newspaper anywhere singles out a short story collection, or more than one.’<sup>55</sup> Hershman’s point is disputed by Dr Ailsa Cox, founder of the Edge Hill short story prize. Interviewed in 2010, Dr Cox notes that since the prize was founded in 2007 ‘British and Irish short story collections are now reviewed regularly on literary pages. Short stories also appear more often in newspaper supplements’ but that ‘I don’t always feel the work published in newspapers necessarily represents the best contemporary short story writing. I’m disappointed that we see a lot of work by writers who are primarily novelists and have not really made the form their own; and a lot of ‘undiscovered till now’ minor works from the attics of dead authors.’<sup>56</sup> Leading UK literary agent Jane Smith agrees with Dr Cox; asked in 2009 what

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>54</sup>Tania Hershman, ‘About’, *The Short Review*, <<http://theshortreview.com/about.htm>>, [accessed 27 January 2011].

<sup>55</sup>Tania Hershman, ‘Interview 4 – Tania Hershman’, 15 January 2010, Appendix B.

<sup>56</sup>Dr Ailsa Cox, ‘Interview 2 – Dr Ailsa Cox’, 26 January 2010, Appendix B.

changes she has seen on the market since the 2003 research into the state of the short story in the UK as part of the Save Our Short Story campaign, Smith says that ‘There are definitely some good things that have happened. Turn to *The Bookseller* today, to the March Preview, and here is a distinct section called ‘Literary Short Stories’ that did not exist five years ago: you would not have had *The Bookseller* previewing collections of short stories separately.’<sup>57</sup> However, Smith goes on to agree with Baverstock’s views on the squeezing of the mid-list and does not see short story collections as having a notable commercial presence or viability in the current climate.

### **Brand before beauty**

As Unwin predicted, television has become one of the top factors governing peoples’ book buying and reading choices.<sup>58</sup> According to Baverstock’s figures from 2000, there are over 30,000 reading groups in Britain alone.<sup>59</sup> This has been followed by the introduction of celebrity-headed television book-club programmes which raise epitextual awareness of specific titles and authors amongst a mass audience. The phenomenal popularity of the original Richard and Judy Book Club led to Amanda Ross – head of the

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<sup>57</sup>Smith, ‘Interview 1 – Jane Smith’, 10 December 2009, Appendix B.

<sup>58</sup>Unwin, p. 254.

<sup>59</sup>Baverstock, p. 4.

Richard and Judy Book Club – being named top of a list of the fifty most influential people in publishing by *The Observer* in 2006.<sup>60</sup>

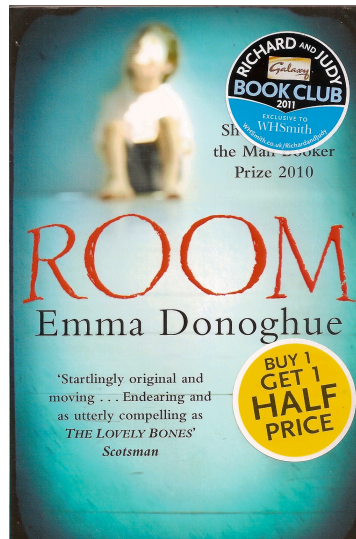
There is a recognised commercial benefit of a title being featured on one of these television book clubs, for example ‘[I]t was reported that *Cloud Atlas* benefited from a nineteen-fold increase in sales in the two weeks after it was discussed on the television programme, peaking at a sale of just under 30,000 copies in one week alone.’<sup>61</sup> More recently Emma Donoghue’s Man Booker shortlisted *Room* (2010) saw a 20 percent week-on-week sales increase when it ‘sold 26,368 copies in the seven days to 22<sup>nd</sup> January, up 4,500 on its previous week sale’ and ‘stormed to the top of The Official UK Top 50’ after being featured on the TV Book Club.<sup>62</sup> Marketing tie-ins with promotional offers in the major bookselling chains focus heavily on titles which have achieved a certain prominence through extensive review coverage, book-club appeal and major literary award nominations. Readers are reminded of these epitextual seals of approval through instore promotional posters and through stickers on the book jackets, as seen here on Emma Donoghue’s *Room*:

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<sup>60</sup>Robert McCrum, ‘Our Top 50 Players in the World of Books’, *Observer*, 5 March 2006, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/mar/05/features.review>>, [accessed 15 December 2008].

<sup>61</sup>Squires, p. 175.

<sup>62</sup>Philip Stone, ‘Room at the top for Emma Donoghue’, *Bookseller*, 26 January 2011, <<http://www.thebookseller.com/news/room-top-emma-donoghue.html>>, [accessed 26 January 2011].



Under the sticker for the Richard and Judy Book Club it can still be seen that the book's shortlisting for the Man Booker Prize 2010 has become incorporated into the book jacket design for this edition.

In *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today* (1996), Richard Todd points out that it 'has been suggested (not wholly frivolously) that the late twentieth-century prize and media consumer culture does not differ substantially from aristocratic patronage in the age of Shakespeare.'<sup>63</sup> However, due to the perceived lack of commercial appeal of the short story, there is not an equal access to the same marketing funds or epitextual opportunities for short story collections as novels, as noted by Jane Smith:

Are publishers going to spend promotional money on putting short story collections in 3-for-2's? Or at the front of the shop? No, they're not. The percentage of the people who actually make it to the back of the shop where they might find the short stories is relatively few. That's how this whole idea of

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<sup>63</sup>Richard Todd, *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 10.

promoting the short story collection as if it was a novel – linked short stories – came about: so they could get it further forward into the shop.<sup>64</sup>

So it is that through a direct association with novels rather than short story collections, hybrid books open themselves up to wider commercial markets.

Despite awarding Alice Munro – known and lauded primarily as a short fiction writer—the 2009 Man Booker International Prize, the annual Man Booker Prize For Fiction ‘still shuns volumes of short fiction.’<sup>65</sup> Which means that first-rank debut collections [...] never stand a fighting chance.’<sup>66</sup> In reaction to this, over the last half decade, Britain has seen the introduction of an assortment of highly financed, high profile prizes for short fiction. Dr Ailsa Cox describes the rationale behind founding the Edge Hill short story prize for a single-author collection in 2007 as ‘this was something which might have a direct impact on publishers; it would encourage them to publish collections, which have been traditionally regarded as second-best to a novels. This meant it was absolutely unique in the UK.’<sup>67</sup> The BBC National Short Story Award was founded in 2005 as a direct result of the Save Our Short Story Campaign and on the website for the award is a statement that ‘The BBC hopes that the award can continue to serve as a reminder of the power of the short story in a literary environment dominated by the

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<sup>64</sup>Smith, ‘Interview 1 – Jane Smith’, Appendix B.

<sup>65</sup>The Man Booker International Prize is awarded once every two years to a living author for a body of work that has contributed to an achievement in fiction on the world stage.

<sup>66</sup>Boyd Tonkin, ‘Short-haul fiction, long-term benefits’, *Independent*, 31 July 2009, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/boyd-tonkin-shorthaul-fiction%E2%80%94longterm-benefits-1764876.html>>, [accessed 26 January 2011].

<sup>67</sup>Cox, ‘Interview 2 – Dr Ailsa Cox’, Appendix B.

novel.’<sup>68</sup> The financial rewards of winning either the BBC National Short Story Award or the more recently founded Sunday Time EFG Private Bank Short Story Award are considerable: fifteen thousand pounds for the former and thirty thousand pounds for the latter. In addition the author gains considerable media exposure for themselves and any forthcoming titles.

When for the second year running a short story collection won the Guardian First Book Award, the chair of the judging panel – Claire Armitstead – declared that ‘2009 has been the year of the short story.’<sup>69</sup> However, while recent attempts to rehabilitate the prestige of the short story may be starting to take effect – Dr Ailsa Cox notes that ‘academic publishers are producing more students guides and surveys of the short story – this does not necessarily translate to a strong commercial impact and therefore to the acquisition decisions of the major publishing houses.’<sup>70</sup> While Jane Smith agrees that ‘[t]he prizes are very important for short fiction as well, to give new oxygen to a book that has been out for a while and probably hasn’t been as noticed’, she has a less positive view on Armitstead’s comments due to wider problems within the publishing industry, saying that:

[I]t’ll probably make editors a bit more sympathetic. But then editors are being made redundant and publishers are cutting their lists by as much as a third. Whether they’re going to have the space on their lists for short story writers in the present circumstances... if it had been ‘The Year of the Short story’ back in 2002 you could have maybe seen a steady graph, but things are so uncertain at the

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<sup>68</sup>‘BBC National Short Story Award’ <<http://www.theshortstory.org.uk/nssp/2010.php>>, [accessed 2 February 2011].

<sup>69</sup>Claire Armitstead, ‘Short story collection wins Guardian First Books Award 2009’, *Guardian*, 3 December 2009, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/gnm-press-office/guardian-first-book-award-20091>>, [accessed 26 January 2011].

<sup>70</sup>Cox, ‘Interview 2 – Dr Ailsa Cox’, Appendix B.

moment that we might see good but odd examples of short stories popping up in publishers' lists. I wouldn't say that it's going to be a trend.<sup>71</sup>

It can therefore be considered in a hybrid book's best interests to utilise paratext which indicates the monotext end of the sliding scale in order to maximise sales, even if the structural integrity of the book is closer to a polytext. This will enhance the book's chance of being selected by booksellers and reviewers, gaining access to a wider range of audiences.

Smith discusses the squeezing of the newspaper review pages and bemoans the decline in variety due to the changing economic climate for print media.<sup>72</sup> Since '[f]eatures and reviews of books in the media are one of the most influential ways of shaping reading habits.' This results in a narrowed selection of titles making up the bulk of customer's fiction purchases.<sup>73</sup> To date, none of the titles featured on the Richard and Judy Book Club or the TV Bookclub have been marketed as short story collections. Smith identifies certain types of text as having a particular appeal for book-groups, noting that 'We had one here ourselves – *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* – which did brilliantly well. It was the kind of fiction that publishers became interested in; the sort of fiction that book-groups responded to very readily.'<sup>74</sup> The exposure gained by these books makes them a natural selection for publishers' marketing budgets, with particular attention being paid to branding the author's backlist – and future titles – to maximise on the success of

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<sup>71</sup>Smith, 'Interview 1 – Jane Smith', Appendix B.

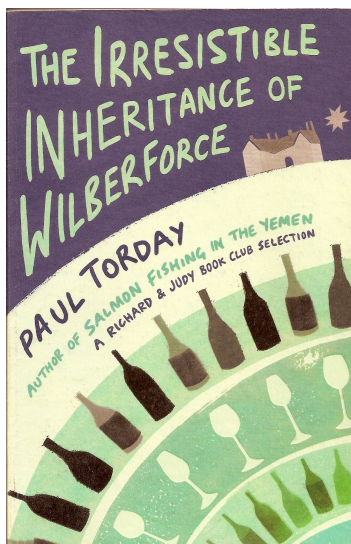
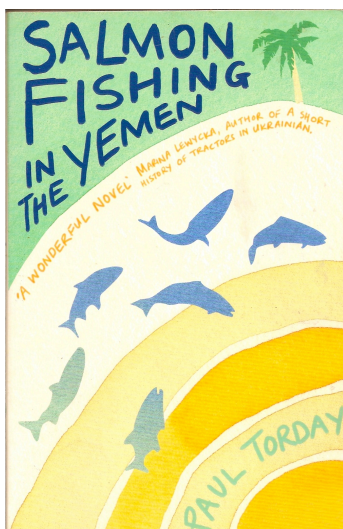
<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

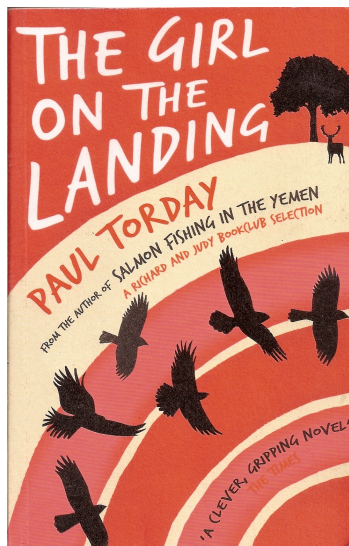
<sup>73</sup>Baverstock, p. 185.

<sup>74</sup>Smith, 'Interview 1 – Jane Smith', Appendix B.



the chosen title. In the 2009 interview, Smith identifies how and why Orion did this with Paul Torday's *oeuvre*:





saying that ‘they’ve put a ‘look’ onto each of his books so that people can – with the noise of everything else happening –recognise that and hone in on it.’<sup>75</sup>

While creating a brand for an author’s work can enhance its marketability, it can also have a negative effect. Angus Phillips notes that ‘[p]roblems for a brand can develop, for example when the author decides to write in a different style or genre. Readers may be disappointed to discover that the book is not what they are expecting.’<sup>76</sup> In this way, authors are discouraged from experimentation – for example, an author might be wary of ‘tainting’ their brand by publishing a collection of short fiction if their reputation is built on their solid adherence to monotextual books. In early 2011, HarperCollins added a morals clause to their author contracts, allowing them the right to terminate a contract if ‘Author’s conduct evidences a lack of due regard for public conventions and morals, or if

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

<sup>76</sup>Angus Phillips, ‘How Books Are Positioned in the Market: Reading the Cover’, *Judging a Book by Its Cover: Fans, Publishers, Designers, and the Marketing of Fiction* ed. Nicole Matthews and Nickianne Moody (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 19-30, (p. 25).

Author commits a crime or any other act that will tend to bring Author into serious contempt, and such behavior would materially damage the Work's reputation or sales.'<sup>77</sup> This concern for the epitext extends the pre-awareness of the text far beyond an awareness of an author's general style or choice of topic and into the author's personal life. This has the interesting side effect of turning the author into a quasi-character in their own fiction, something which I touch upon in the following chapter. In the meantime, I am going to look at the paratextual presentation of hybrid fiction which has been successful at attracting wide media attention and analyse how it falls on the sliding scale between monotext and polytext.

### **Text appeal**

My reasons for selecting *Cloud Atlas* (2004), by David Mitchell, and *One Good Turn* (2006), by Kate Atkinson, for an in-depth analysis of their mono- or polytextual tendencies are due to their commercial and critical success as hybrid works. Each text comments explicitly on its own polytextual tendencies as part of its narrative, openly bringing the reader into the debate through the diegesis, despite being marketed as novels (monotexts). Their high sales figures suggest a wide readership and they have been critically acclaimed through reviews and awards as gripping and enjoyable reads. Their use of the structural metaphor of Russian matryoshka dolls creates an extra level of intertextual similarity between *Cloud Atlas* and *One Good Turn*. Both Mitchell and Atkinson make a variety of intertextual allusions in their subject matter, titles, and themes

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<sup>77</sup>Richard Curtis, 'Are You a Moral Author?', *E-reads.com*, 16 January 2011, <<http://ereads.com/2011/01/are-you-a-moral-author.html>>, [accessed 27 January 2011].

as well as direct and paraphrased quotations from other well-known literary and historical texts. They refer to the world of books, using a self-awareness of fictional diegesis to question the perceived reality of everyday life: the worlds of literature are places where intangible characters and places are on some level more alive than strangers passed on the street since we have a deeper knowledge of their inner workings, and have thus connected to and empathised with them. This paradox – that the never-existed can be more real to us than the living – is explored in depth in Mitchell and Atkinson's fictions, and they make full use of both actual and artificial paratext to present their questions about perception.

Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* is comprised of six sections nested within each other in an inverse parallel structure (ABCDEFEDCBA) so that the book both opens and closes with the first section, 'The Pacific Diary of Adam Ewing.' The diegesis created in each of the six sections of *Cloud Atlas* relies strongly on both the willing suspension of disbelief in the material presence and the context and consequence of its existence within the diegesis it is itself creating in the writing. The pen is lifted and the pages are turned within the manuscript they are producing, and the transition from one material diegesis to the next includes the latter's continuation as an object – though no longer as a creator of diegesis – thus expecting the reader to enter into a new contract of complicity with the creation of the next section: *this time*, we are promised, *this time it's the real thing*. As the section order inverts and begins to move back in on itself, passing backwards through the diegeses, we are no longer asked to believe in the presentation of reality, but in the presentation of fiction. This is similar to the structure of Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's*

*night a traveller* (1979), in which the continual absorption of one level of fictionality by the following section combined with the direct address to and involvement of the reader in the narrative process of the text forces a questioning of the reader's own position as a fictioning device.

The stylised typography of the section title pages – and the subheadings and text within them – becomes key in positioning the reader within the thematic genre which the narrative pastiches. It also orients the reader chronologically in relation to the 'present' diegesis of Timothy Cavendish: do they look old fashioned, or futuristic?

*The Pacific Journal of  
Adam Ewing*

Letters from Zedelghem

Half-Lives  
The First Luisa Rey  
Mystery

The Ghastly Ordeal of  
Timothy Cavendish

An Orison of Sonmi~451

*Sloosha's Crossin' an'  
Ev'rythin' After*

The same questions can be asked of the format of presentation, and the tone of the fiction: both the history of the words used and their visual presentation are key in contextualising the diegesis. There is an explicit awareness of these changes from section

to section, with comments such as, ‘a man is ruined when the times change, but he does not.’<sup>78</sup> This could be taken as a justification of Mitchell’s use of structuring techniques; he is breaking with tradition to reflect the world he lives in and keep literature alive and relevant. *Cloud Atlas* is neither Mitchell’s first nor his only experiment in the effects of sectioning devices; a brief glance at Mitchell’s *oeuvre* reveals a pattern of structural experimentation. Preceding *Cloud Atlas*, *number9dream* (2001) has a quasi-chronological structure (albeit one with a variety of ‘dream’ episodes which are then jumped back from into the main ‘reality’ diegesis) and a typically monotextual single narrator. The narrator’s journey to self-discovery forms the main thrust of the plot and the book is divided into nine autonomously titled sections. These nine sections are both numerically headed on a section cover page and autonomously titled on the same cover page. The sections are further interrupted to indicate textual breaks with symbols which alternate irregularly between the same symbol which occurs on the section cover page and a black square turned on one point like a diamond:

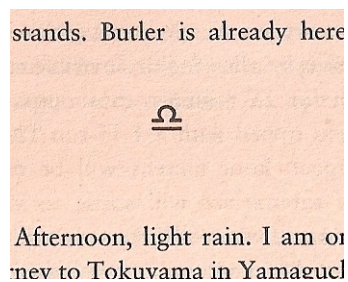



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<sup>78</sup>David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, (London: Sceptre, 2004), p. 76.



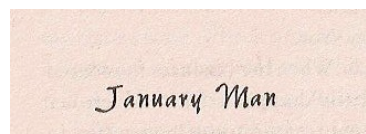
An exception to this is section six, which uses an alternative symbol to the Japanese characters on the cover page as a break-marker:



Section seven, in comparison, uses only the black square as an internal break-marker and section nine contains no text or symbols.

Section five initially breaks markedly from both the main diegesis and the dream diegeses and contains the subheadings ‘Margins’, ‘Hungry Town’, ‘Queen Erichnid’s Web’ and ‘Study of Tales.’ The absence of text in section nine is explained in reference to the title itself, which is discussed in an overt dream sequence in section eight where Eiji Miyake, the narrator, meets John Lennon, writer and singer of the song ‘#9 dream.’ Eiji asks John what the title of the song means, and is given the response, ‘the ninth dream begins after every ending.’<sup>79</sup> Each of the eight previous sections explores a different concept of the meaning and experience of reality, both in overtly in terms of fiction and in a more general, philosophical sense. In this sense, although the book follows an overtly monotextual format, the individuality of the sections within – if not separate from – the book, as asserted by their autonomous cover-page titles, suggests certain polytextual influences.

Likewise, *Black Swan Green* (2006) is, on first appearances, a classic monotext. Each chapter is set a month after the previous, creating a thirteen-month loop from one January to January the following year. However, the chapters are given autonomous titles rather than numerical headings. The status of these headings as autonomous titles rather than subheadings is enforced by their distinctive font:




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<sup>79</sup>David Mitchell, *number9dream*, (London: Sceptre, 2001) p. 398.



but the book as a whole is contained within one section: the internal cover page of the book is echoed in the form of a section cover page. This slightly unusual repetition is echoed by the contents of the chapters: each contains its own, separate diegetic information rather than an assumption of shared information between the chapters. In a monotext, the overt expectation is that information imparted from one chapter will be carried over into the next. In a polytext such as *Black Swan Green*, each diegesis contains the information necessary for it to be read as a separate story out with its juxtaposition with the other section within the bindings of the book and still to be a complete and satisfying fiction. Since each of the thirteen sections shares a typically monotextual unity of setting, narrator, protagonist and diegetic strategy as the others, their polytextual nature can be detected through minor repetitions of information which, in a monotext, would be seen as jarring and unnecessary.

Unlike both *number9dream* and *Black Swan Green*, Mitchell's first book, *Ghostwritten* (1999), is told from the perspective of nine narrators separated by time, space, and culture. Each of the ten chapters focuses on the experiences of a different narrator, with the exceptions of the opening and closing sections ('Okinawa' and 'Underground'), both of which are narrated by Quasar. There is a series of thematic links, coincidences and phrases which imply rather than state the connections between the nine narrators. The separate diegetic levels created by the nine narrators, despite the connections between them, indicate that *Ghostwritten* is more polytextual than monotextual. As with all books which include chapter titles, this is substantiated by the inclusion of a contents page which allows the reader to identify the positioning of the

separate sections within the book. This suggests that they may be read separately or out of order: apart from the placement within the book, there are no numerical indicators suggesting a set order of reading:

Contents	
Okinawa	1
Tokyo	33
Hong Kong	65
Holy Mountain	111
Mongolia	153
Petersburg	203
London	263
Clear Island	319
Night Train	381
Underground	431

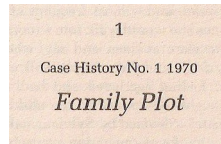
The sections are indicated within the text through section title pages containing the autonomous titles of the fictions, which are thematically linked through their geographical references. Since the sections narrated by Quasar open and close the book, his diegesis is given a privileged position, and at the end of the book he is left pondering the nature of reality having had a semi-hallucinogenic experience which ties together different strands from the other eight narrators' diegeses. This brings into question the 'reality' of the fiction which the reader has just been reading, suggesting that they may have been presented on another level of fiction as Quasar's hallucinations. Mitchell revisits this preoccupation with the nature of reality and experience in *number9dream* and goes into further depth in *Cloud Atlas* where he also questions perceptions of authority in the written word.

In *Cloud Atlas*, despite the use of paratext to segregate the sections through typography, tone and period, the sections are ordered chronologically and share explicit diegetic elements – such as the appearance of Rufus Sixsmith in both 'Half Lives: The

First Luisa Rey Mystery’ and ‘Letters from Zedelghem.’ They also contain more subtle recurring motifs, themes, phrases and words reminiscent of the polytextual links between the sections of *Ghostwritten*. Unlike in *Black Swan Green*, information is not repeated between sections, suggesting a monotextual, linear reading experience. Due to the pastiche nature of the six sections in *Cloud Atlas*, the fictions cannot stand alone: they are amusing as a pastiche of thematic genre but only in a context where it is clear that they are supposed to be a pastiche since they otherwise appear outdated or badly written. These sections rely on each other more completely than the sections in Mitchell’s previous four books, despite *Cloud Atlas* appearing – at first glance – the most polytextual of his *oeuvre*. The intratextuality between the diegetic layers of each section mean that they would not make sense separately: their nature is to be intricately interwoven as part of the overall text, despite the autonomy of the sections supposedly enforced by the lack of numerical indicators. Unlike *Ghostwritten*, or *Black Swan Green*, in *Cloud Atlas* the numerical indicators are not necessary as the sections cannot be read out of order without becoming incoherent. Instead the autonomous titles of the sections’ title pages are used to enforce the existence of the *mise en scène* of the fictions. As in Sarah Hall’s *How to Paint a Dead Man*, they also provide an orientation guide for the reader, especially when the sections are re-visited in inverted order.

Before looking in detail at Kate Atkinson’s *One Good Turn*, I will give a brief overview of some of the narrative structures of Atkinson’s other publications. In *Case Histories* (2004) – the prequel to *One Good Turn* – Atkinson introduces the character Jackson for the first time. Characteristically of Atkinson’s work, unusual paratext

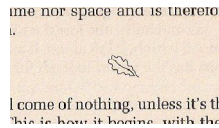
enforces the fictional diegesis as ‘detective’ fiction, as well as orienting the reader through sectioning techniques such as the stylised intertitles:



The protagonist, Jackson, doesn't appear until Chapter four; he is the figure who brings together and, consequently, brings resolution to, the three past-story strands introduced in the first three chapters, 'Family Plot', 'Just a Normal Day' and 'Everything from Duty, Nothing from Love.' While the majority of the chapters of *Case Histories* are subtitled according to the focal character appearing within them, these non-character titled fictions are presented as the case histories of the main title, and form the historical background of the situation unfolding in the main diegesis. The organisation of the chapters inverts in an asymmetrical fashion, swapping between the focus-narrators of the main diegesis. Also, a new past-story strand involving Jackson ('Holy Girls') is introduced roughly three-quarters of the way through the book; this point signals the beginning of resolution; subsequently, the plot is involved in tying up loose ends, and the three original past-story strands are re-introduced in inverted order. The book ends with a new story-strand set in the main diegesis – 'And Julia Said' – which continues to focus on Jackson. This prepares the reader for a continued relationship with Jackson in future books, such as *One Good Turn*. This use of continuation and resolution between books is discussed in greater depth in Chapter five.

*Human Croquet* (1997) also uses unusual paratext, with a combination of cover pages and chapter titles being used as section dividers but – in a departure from her usual style

– no numerical headings. For example, Atkinson repeatedly uses the motif of a line drawing of a leaf as a break-marker:



Title pages indicate whether the section is set in the past, present or future, structuring the book temporally. Chapter titles divide the diegesis of the section and indicate the content of the chapter – for example ‘KILLING TIME’ in which the character Mr Baxter is killed and the reader is encouraged to begin questioning the veracity of the events being reported. In *Human Croquet* Atkinson used a characteristic self-awareness of written form and narrator/author/reader interaction to develop an ironic, playful tone. The entire concept of the diegesis of a book is clearly summed up by the narrator in the first chapter in what could be seen as the text’s mission statement, ‘I am Isobel Fairfax, I am the alpha and omega of narrators (I am omniscient) and I know the beginning and the end. The beginning is the word and the end is silence. And in between are all the stories.’<sup>80</sup> This concept of narrator as creator – and of the opening of a book as the creation of a new world – links with the concept that the book is presenting an alternative fictional reality.<sup>81</sup> *Human Croquet* opens with a title page entitled ‘BEGINNING’, and asks in the first sentence, ‘Where shall I begin?’<sup>82</sup> Like *Case Histories*, it ends by looking to the future but rather than creating an expectation of continuation it presents a summary of the futures of the main characters, giving a strong sense of resolution and conclusion. This is

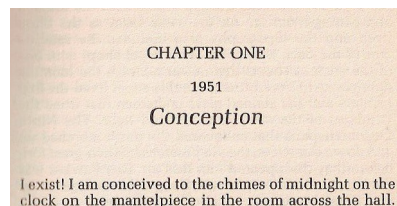
<sup>80</sup>Kate Atkinson, *Human Croquet* (London: Doubleday, 1997; repr. London: Black Swan, 1998), p. 20.

<sup>81</sup>Similarly, the first man mentioned in Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* is named ‘Adam.’

<sup>82</sup>Atkinson, *Human Croquet*, p. 11.

emphasised by the narrator's reassertion of her veracity as well as her control over the text, closing with the words, 'I am the storyteller at the end of time. I know how it ends. It ends like this.'<sup>83</sup> The narrative remarks on its own time shifts as they are echoed by the narrator's personal experience, making humorous asides, such as 'This is ridiculous. There should be some rule about time warps (no more than one per chapter, for instance) and surely you should at least be able to tell what bit of the space-time continuum you're in.'<sup>84</sup> This self-awareness encourages the reader to pay particular attention to the sectioning devices used, especially when a note of self-doubt creeps in with the title page 'MAYBE' following directly on from the title page 'PRESENT' at the roughly three-quarter mark of the book where, as in *Case Histories*, Atkinson directs the plot towards resolution rather than revelation.

On first glance, Atkinson's first book, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1995), appears to take a traditional, linear approach to narrative structure. Each of the thirteen chapters moves in chronological and linear order, clearly labelled with a numerical heading, a subheading of the year in which the chapter is set, and then an individual chapter title indicating the thematic content of the chapter:



However, the time-jumps which are a notable feature of both *Case Histories* and *Human Croquet* are still present since, with the exception of the final chapter, each chapter is

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid, p. 378.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid, pp. 229-230.

followed by a separately titled ‘footnote’<sup>85</sup> which gives insights into the past which strongly affects the present of the diegesis; a ‘twist’ of revelation which reoccurs with the inverted return to the individually titled past-story strands in *Case Histories*. Like *Human Croquet*, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* has a strongly self-aware quality in its diegesis, opening with a playful reference to *Tristram Shandy* (1759) in its joyful, ‘I exist! I am conceived to the chimes of midnight on the clock on the mantelpiece in the room across the hall.’<sup>86</sup> This self-awareness of the narrator-protagonist – as in *Human Croquet* – is openly tied to the self-awareness of diegesis: both books are written in the first person and declare their own existence as a condition to the existence of the text and the materiality of the book. The narrator is openly tied to the concept of the story as *text*, just as the text’s creation is openly tied to the existence of the narrator. Like *Human Croquet*, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* comments on the role of the diegesis of the book, saying that ‘In the end, it is my belief, words are the only things that can construct a world that makes sense.’<sup>87</sup> The twenty-two year leap in the diegesis from the penultimate chapter – set in 1970 – to the final chapter – set in 1992 – also sets the precedent for Atkinson’s tendency to create a sense of conclusion by tying up narrative loose ends and summarising the future of the main characters beyond the time frame of the main diegesis.

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<sup>85</sup>Designated as a footnote in the title, which also contains a linear notation and an individual title.

<sup>86</sup>Kate Atkinson, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (London: Doubleday, 1995; repr. London: Black Swan, 1998), p. 9.

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid*, p. 382.

While *Emotionally Weird* (2000) uses paratext to orient the reader within the different layers of diegesis, the boundaries of the sections are not strictly adhered to, and the diegetic markers are more reliably based on the font used than the section indicated. What appears to be the main diegesis, ‘Chez Bob’, uses a typical serif font. However, the appearance of textual inserts from what originally appeared to be an alternative, past-reality to the main diegesis ‘Blood and Bone’, demonstrates that the fake-main diegesis is actually appearing as an articulated literary artefact within the actual-main diegesis. This actual-main diegesis is told by the same narrator as in the fake-main diegesis and uses a sans-serif font as well as line-drawings of a sea-shell to indicate internal textual breaks. The autonomous titles of the actual-main diegesis change from section to section, indicating its higher diegetic status than the other, overtly fictional diegetic levels. The narrator, Effie, is writing a crime novel as part of a university assignment in creative writing, ‘The Hand of Fate’, an extract of which makes up the opening section of the book. Extracts from the work being written by the rest of Effie’s class also appear throughout the book, signalled by their distinctive typography, which reflects the stylistic tendencies of their thematic genres:

‘Perhaps,’ J agreed cautiously with the man who would forever be an enemy to him, ‘but on the other hand, perhaps not.’

Kenny    There's nothing. Nothing. Do you hear me?  
 Dod       I know.  
 Jed       Perhaps Rick was right after all.

*‘Yes, of course I will,’ Flick murmured happily as Jake pulled her into his arms and began to kiss her with fierce abandonment.*

‘Well, well,’ Madame Astarti said. ‘Whoever would have thought that you were the murderer all along.’

Duke Jhar-Vint mounted his steed Demaal and saluted farewell to his trusty steward Lart. He turned to the Lady Agaruiitha riding beside him and said, ‘One chapter may have closed, but the fight for justice will go on for ever.’

And the winner of the Booker Prize for the year 2001 is ... Andrea Garnett for her novel *Anthea's Anguish*.



This is similar to the *mise en scène* of sections appearing as literary artefacts within other sections of the same book already noted in *Cloud Atlas* and *number9dream*. However, the titles are not strictly adhered to, and the different diegetic levels are jumbled together in the majority of the sections. Like *Human Croquet* and *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, *Emotionally Weird* has an ironically self-aware diegesis, containing similar humorous asides as seen before, such as ‘It is all endings now’ opening one of the final sections, which happens to present the ends to all of the stories opened in the book.<sup>88</sup> *Emotionally Weird* develops the self-awareness of the narrator as creator of the fiction into an awareness of the materiality of the text as a book and the concept of ‘professional’ authorship as opposed to the self-narration which is glimpsed at the end of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, where the narrator, Ruby Lennox, informs us that she translates English technical books into Italian, has had a volume of poems published, and intends ‘to begin work on a grand project – a cycle of poems based on the family tree. There will be room for everyone – Ada and Albert, Alice and Rachel, Tina Donner and Tessa Blake, even the contingent lives of Monsieur Jean-Paul Armand and Ena Tetley, Minnie Havis and Mrs Sieviewright, for they all have a place amongst our branches and who is to say which of these is real and which a fiction?’<sup>89</sup> This ‘grand project’ sounds remarkably like the book the reader has almost finished reading, bringing the reader in a cyclical motion back to the beginning of the text. This concept is developed in *Emotionally Weird*, where

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<sup>88</sup>Kate Atkinson, *Emotionally Weird: A Comic Novel* (London: Doubleday, 2000; repr. London: Black Swan, 2001) p. 397.

<sup>89</sup>Kate Atkinson, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum*, p. 382.

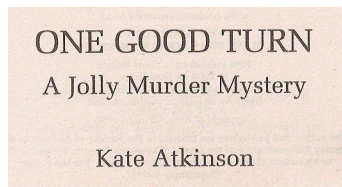
the sense of resolution is gained not only through the summaries of the future lives of the main characters, but also with information about the future lives of the various books being written within the text. The final section of the book – appropriately titled ‘Last Words’ – gives the concluding sentences for each of the books from which the reader has been treated to extracts, thus tying up loose ends of each of the different fictional levels within the actual-main and fake-main diegeses.

Both *Case Histories* and *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* play around with paratext as a sectioning device, but ultimately they use it to orient the reader within the complete diegesis of a monotext rather than divide it into a polytext. The single narrator of *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* gives cohesion to the disparate time narratives, as does the character Jackson in *Case Histories*. Despite having a single, omniscient narrator whose role echoes that of the author of the book, *Human Croquet* makes fuller use of the ambiguity that sectioning devices can introduce into the structure of a book, but is also still notably a monotext. In contrast, *Emotionally Weird* is a fragmented, multi-structured book with disparate elements that should indicate it is a polytext. Interestingly, however, as in Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*, the separate parts rely so strongly on their contextual presentation that they cannot work as pieces of literary fiction autonomously from the juxtaposition of the book as a whole: by playing with pastiche of genres, both *Cloud Atlas* and *Emotionally Weird* limit the scope of the individual sections since they must be seen in contrast to other pieces to highlight the satirical and ironic elements. Despite the visual appearance of polytextuality which the typographic and sectional devices

employed in the two books suggests, they are more monotextual than any of the other works by either Mitchell or Atkinson.

*One Good Turn* frames itself monotextually by opening and closing the text with the same section protagonist – Ray. This is echoed by the use of numerical intertitles to impose an explicitly linear reading pattern. Despite the apparent narrative autonomy of the sections – if assembled, each narrative thread could feasibly stand autonomously – the textual allusions between each narrative mean that the arc of unity of the text is stronger than the arc of unity of each individual narrative strand. From about three quarters of the way through the text – ‘43’ onwards – there is an increased narrative impetus towards resolution, characteristic of Atkinson’s structures. From this point onwards the stories begin to link directly to each other: the text moves from polytextual disparity to monotextual unity as the fictions achieve resolution as a whole rather than autonomously. The reader’s expectation is shifted from a position of privileged knowledge to sharing the same position of knowledge as the characters themselves, leading to the concluding twist in the final section.

As in *Case Histories*, the recurring character Jackson is used to bring the sections together. The cliff-hanger endings to the sections in which he is the protagonist tie in with the genre-indicator subtitle of the book:



These cliff-hanger endings also keep the reader in a heightened state of anticipation due to the continual positing of Jackson's demise. The title of the book is echoed by the changing narrative focus and the movement of material objects between the sections. This is reinforced by the epigraph, suggesting that the structuring technique is akin to a sinister game of pass-the-parcel:

*Male paria, male dilabuntur.*  
 (What is dishonourably got is dishonourably  
 squandered.)  
 (Cicero, *Philippics*, II, 27)

The effect of revisiting Jackson as a protagonist – and also Julia as a side character – is discussed in Chapter five.

The first parts of each narrative thread end more or less at the point when the protagonist is brought to the setting of the fight scene, providing the first explicit intrasectional link. To begin with the narratives are presented as separate stories with this geographic contrivance being left as a coincidence rather than a monotextual binding device. These repetitions of setting and theme are echoed by the division of the sections by weekday. For example, the first full section ends as it began: the Honda man attacking and the threat of the dog attack being fulfilled. This repetition and development is a key element associated with the short story cycle.

The focus on architecture in *One Good Turn* echoes the structural building devices in the text. For example, the homes which Graham Hatter builds are sized like matryoshka dolls: 'The 'Kinloch' was the cheapest, the 'Waverley' the most expensive.

The ‘Hartford’ and the ‘Braecroft’ were semi-detached. Nowadays Graham built a lot more detached houses than he used to. The ‘Kinloch’ was so tiny it reminded Gloria of a Monopoly house.’<sup>90</sup> It is in Graham Hatter’s own, huge home that all the other characters are brought together at the end. This is echoed in the pattern of relationship in the text, where the last matryoshka is the ‘baby’ which is what Martin wants, what Louise has, and what Jackson and Julia briefly end up with. Like the matryoshka doll, every story in *One Good Turn* has a body in the middle – Jackson and the baby, Martin and Irina, Gloria and Graham, Louise and Jellybean, Ray and Graham – and it is the actual matryoshka which contains the memory-stick of Martin’s missing novel at the end. This is referenced explicitly in the text, especially in the Martin sections where he ‘imagined writing a story, a Borges-like construction where each story contained the kernel of the next and so on.’<sup>91</sup> Likewise, when Martin has been in Paul Bradley’s bag he finds ‘just a black plastic box, a mystery within a mystery. Perhaps the box would contain another box, and inside that box another box, and so on, like the Russian dolls.’<sup>92</sup> The text’s explicit reference to its own structure through the metaphor of the matryoshka dolls is also a key characteristic of Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*, where the reader encounters Vyvyan Ayrs’s ‘*Matruschka Doll Variations* and his song cycle *Society Islands*.’<sup>93</sup> Likewise, Sonmi 451 hears a circusman trying to drum up business to ‘Gaze upon Madame Matryoshka and Her Pregnant Embryo’ and Isaac Sachs writes in his notebook:

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<sup>90</sup>Kate Atkinson, *One Good Turn: A Jolly Murder Mystery* (London: Doubleday, 2006; repr. London: Black Swan, 2007), p. 249.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid, p. 233.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid, pp. 155-156.

<sup>93</sup>Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*, p. 52.

*One model of time: an infinite matrioshka doll of painted moments, each 'shell' (the present) encased inside a nest of 'shells' (previous presents) I call the actual past but which we perceive as the virtual past. The doll of 'now' likewise encases a nest of presents yet to be, which I call the actual future but which we perceive as the virtual future.*<sup>94</sup>

These knowing references to structuring techniques in *One Good Turn* and *Cloud Atlas* reward the perceptive reader's desire to recognise patterns, as discussed in Chapter one. This intended payoff from following small details between sections is made explicit with lines such as 'That detail alone sent Jackson's brain spinning. Boxes within boxes, dolls within dolls, worlds within worlds. Everything was connected, Everything in the whole world' echoing the reader's connection with the protagonists.<sup>95</sup> Jackson is particularly prone to making such metatextual comments as '[y]ou say coincidence, he thought, I say connection. A baffling, impenetrably complex connection, but nonetheless a connection' since his role as detective mimics the role of the reader following the plot.<sup>96</sup>

While *One Good Turn* is more monotextual than polytextual, I argue that it does not fall as closely to the monotext end of the sliding scale as *Cloud Atlas*. The narrative threads are – in the first half of the book – notably separate from each other in terms of plot-arc. However, their spliced presentation foreshadows the drawing together of the arc of unity at the end of the book. An expectation that they will begin to link through content as well as juxtaposition – as in Sarah Hall's *How to Paint a Dead Man* – is created by their presentation in instalments. In the following chapter I discuss how digital technology may open up the option of de-splicing books such as *One Good Turn* and

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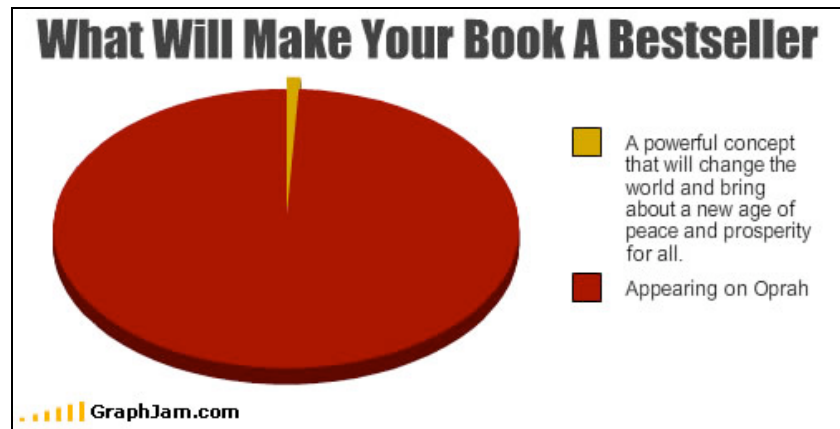
<sup>94</sup>Ibid, p. 353 and p. 409. Italics in original.

<sup>95</sup>Kate Atkinson, *One Good Turn*, p. 463.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid, p. 369.

*Cloud Atlas* as e-reader technology opens up the possibility of removing control over of the pre-set reading patterns of the printed, bound book.

## Chapter three



jsiva, *GraphJam.com*

Reception of literature has changed from orally transmitted tales to handwritten scrolls, from illuminated manuscripts to the Penguin paperback. It must– inevitably – continue to adapt in order to thrive in the digital age. Through an examination of the influence of changing forms of transmission on the content and structure of literary texts, predictions can be formulated for how literature might evolve in the future.

When the internet migrated from research institutes and universities into peoples' homes and businesses, it changed perceptions of mass-communication and mass-production with an impact reminiscent of the industrial revolution two centuries previously. A survey carried out by IBS at the 2007 Frankfurt Book Fair identified digitalisation as the greatest challenge currently faced by the publishing industry, with almost 90% unprepared for digital change.<sup>97</sup> Because the British publishing industry teeters on the brink of wholeheartedly embracing the wider possibilities that

<sup>97</sup>'Publishers Still Wary of Digital Change', *Bookseller*, 19 October 2007, p. 16.



technological advances have opened up in the last half century, this chapter examines how an understanding of contemporary paratext could influence making the most of the opportunities opened up by the digital age.

### **Antisocial networking**

In November 2010, Penguin appointed Nathan Hull as Digital Publisher. In their press release, Penguin state that:

Nathan comes to Penguin from Universal Music where he oversaw digital strategy for major artists including U2, The Rolling Stones, The Killers and Take That and handled Universal's relationships with key digital partners including iTunes, Facebook, Twitter, Amazon, BT and Sky. He was instrumental in shaping the company's strategy for streaming, subscriptions, apps, virtual merchandise and anti-piracy and launched Spotify as well as negotiating deals with Shazam, eBay, Xbox and PS3.<sup>98</sup>

There are obvious lessons for the publishing industry to take from the music industry's engagement with digitalisation, both in terms of accessing content in new forms and problems with piracy and copyright. The issues of payment and ownership are an ongoing battle across all forms of entertainment, with public perception of the right to share the items they have paid for being at the forefront. Before discussing access to digital texts I will first analyse digital epitext.

The digital age has introduced the general public – from toddlers using computers in nurseries to ‘silver surfers’ – to social networking and its lesser cousin: internet ‘stalking.’ Alongside ‘liking’ their favourite authors on Facebook and learning about the

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<sup>98</sup>‘Penguin Appoints Leading Talent From Music Industry to Be Digital Publisher’, *Booktrade.info*, 08 November 2010, <<http://www.booktrade.info/index.php/showarticle/30225>>, [accessed 26 January 2011].

minutiae of their daily routine on Twitter, readers can Google backlists and subscribe to book-club podcasts as part of the extension of epitext into the digital realm:



The internet offers a wide variety of opportunities to promote books and authors to a mass audience with innovative and – perhaps most importantly – cheap techniques. These digital epitexts are a natural extension of pre-existing epitext and function in a broadly similar way, although they may access different audiences. Alongside the introduction of the ‘Facebook effect’ and memes in drumming up enthusiasm for new titles, the internet has changed the industry’s access to its own information. The pace and direction of publishing industry deals and changeovers have been affected by digitalisation– as across all industries. In particular the immediate access to publishing and personal history of potential authors is having a huge causal effect on acquisition decisions. The weekly *Thebookseller.com* ‘First Edition’ e-newsletter contains not only a round-up of sales figures for the top sellers in the previous week but also forthcoming titles alongside their Nielson BookScan ratings. Jane Smith describes publishers as being ‘actually in thrall to these Nielson BookScan ratings’ – presented without context as a quick reference for sales projections – and says that they are affecting acquisition decisions, making it even less

likely that major publishers will go out on a limb for debut authors, authors who have not yet achieved major sales, authors who have previously published with an independent, and authors who have previously published in a less commercially appealing genre.<sup>99</sup> For example, Smith notes that: ‘If you bring out a book with Salt and it sells five hundred copies – which could be good sales for debut short fiction – you’re no longer a debut writer. So your next book, one of the questions your publisher will ask is how many did your last book sell? They’ll be able to go straight to the Nielson figures themselves and see ‘oh dear, it only sold such and such’.’<sup>100</sup>

Nathan Hull’s appointment to Penguin marks a recent turning point in the publishing industry’s engagement with the digital age. It is now taken as a given that publishers will have a website and that is also true of book retailers. The industry domination of *Amazon.co.uk* has led to distinctive changes in the public’s book buying habits, as examined in Alexis Weedon’s essay ‘In Real Life: Book Covers in the Internet Bookstore’ (2007). In her discussion on the role of customer browsing, Weedon notes that shopping online may be quick and convenient, but that the physical detachment from the product is unsatisfactory for the customer and that ‘[o]ne frequently voiced criticism on buying online is that you can’t handle the book, often articulated as a need to turn it over and read the back cover or look inside. Physical handling is an important part of the gratification of browsing.’<sup>101</sup> The social environment of the physical bookstore cannot be

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<sup>99</sup>Smith, ‘Interview 1 – Jane Smith’, Appendix B.

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup>Alexis Weedon, ‘In Real Life: Book Covers in the Internet Bookstore’, *Judging a Book by Its Cover: Fans, Publishers, Designers, and the Marketing of Fiction* ed. Nicole Matthews and Nickianne Moody (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 117-125, (pp. 121-122).

easily replicated online and tends to inhibit traditional impulse buying behaviour, potentially leading to customers taking fewer chances on unknown authors and formats – the equivalent, perhaps, of the 3-for-2 tables at the front of high street retailers discouraging customers from browsing at the back of the shop. This leads to a changing relationship between the peritext of the book and the book buyer: unable to physically handle the printed book, the customer is unable to access the complete peritext. As Weedon points out, ‘Genette’s paratextual elements are evident in the physical space of the bookshop: from genre labels and written recommendations to authors’ interviews and signings. The direction of customers’ browsing is affected by the navigation of these texts.’<sup>102</sup> As seen in the last chapter, hybrid works are often considered difficult to market due either to their association with the short story or with their complex narrative structures. This means that they are less likely to be given the marketing attention which could result in commercial success and the author is therefore less likely to be republished.

This issue of the material presence of the product is also raised by technological advances in book production such as print on demand. The potential to reduce overheads through eliminating storage costs is balanced out by the lack of physical product visibility, about which De Bellaigue says that ‘the great advantage that print on demand provides publishers through the elimination of inventories carries with it the sting of invisibility. Print on demand denies titles a physical presence in retail outlets.’<sup>103</sup> With the reduced associated costs of print runs it is possible that no author need ever go out of

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<sup>102</sup>Ibid, p. 119.

<sup>103</sup>De Bellaigue, p. 211.

print but, conversely, they also run the risk of never actually being printed. Similarly, web-based self-publishing services such as *Lulu.com* and *Blurb.com* allow members of the public to create their own printed books without the intervention of literary agents or publishing houses, leading to a devaluation of content since they also lack access to editorial support. The expectation that a book of fiction published via *Lulu.com* has the same cultural significance as a book published by, for example, Penguin is clearly false: the former is essentially a vanity project unlikely to reach a significant audience or give any financial return to the author; the latter is a team-effort by professionals dedicated to the process of connecting words with readers. Fortunately, the only expectation of parity between the two would appear to be limited to the author of the self-published book. Unfortunately, smaller independent publishers may rely on cheaper production methods such as print on demand in order to keep going. With realistically low expectations of their sales figures, many independent publishers struggle to balance their books whilst still publishing and promoting their lists.

In an interview in 2010, author and editor of the short story online review site *The Short Review*, Tania Hershman, sees independent, smaller publishers as key to the continuing survival of the short story in Britain since '[t]hey seem much more able and willing to take risks, perhaps because they aren't dependent on sales, because they don't assume they will earn that much from sales. [...] Independent presses might be seen as doing what mainstream publishers used to do, before it all got too commercially-focussed.'<sup>104</sup> Hershman's opinion is backed up by author and short story theorist, Dr

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<sup>104</sup>Hershman, 'Interview 4 – Tania Hershman', Appendix B.

Ailsa Cox, who notes that ‘Independent presses are usually run by writers. Writers like short stories because they are virtuoso writing; they push at the boundaries of form and style. Therefore small publishers publish more collections.’<sup>105</sup> In comparison, literary agent Jane Smith explains the lack of support for the short story in the major publishing houses as due to the more commercially driven acquisitions process where the:

[D]ecision to take on a book is no longer an editor feeling very enthusiastic and persuading her colleagues and saying “I’ve found this fantastic writer, dah dah dah.” She or he would have to go to an acquisitions meeting having already got the support of sales, the support of marketing, the support of publicity—and if they’re looking for world rights, the support of the rights department about how many copies they think they can sell the rights to other countries.<sup>106</sup>

Unfortunately, without the marketing budget of the major publishing house, it can be difficult for smaller publishers to gain exposure for their titles. Cutting production costs may be a necessity, but the use of technologies such as print on demand can result in reduced print quality (peritextual experience) and reduced in-store title presence (peritextual access).

An increasingly popular alternative to printing and binding books, e-books offer reduced production and storage costs but open up new issues with distribution and access. As the music industry discovered when taking initial steps towards digital production and access routes, there are not yet accepted industry standards for formatting, pricing, licensing and sharing. This has led to public spats between the major players being played out in the media, for example the contention between Apple and Amazon over

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<sup>105</sup>Cox, ‘Interview 2 – Dr Ailsa Cox’, Appendix B.

<sup>106</sup>Smith, ‘Interview 1 – Jane Smith’, Appendix B.

Kindle sales made through iPad and iPhone apps.<sup>107</sup> As of February 2011, the Office of Fair Trading has launched an investigation into agency pricing – instigated in the UK by Hachette in September 2010, then HarperCollins and Penguin in November 2010, followed by Simon & Schuster in December 2010 – after what it describes as ‘a “significant” number of complaints.’<sup>108</sup> Quoted on *Thebookseller.com*, Tim Godfray, chief executive of the Booksellers Association, described the investigation as ‘a seminal moment’ as the results ‘will inform how the digital map unfolds in our industry. Terms and conditions of supply are a matter between individual publisher and individual retailer, with e-books being no exception to the print version.’<sup>109</sup> Whether this desired adherence to current publishing models will be possible in a digital world is still to be seen. This uncertainty over how to move forward is echoed across the industry: at the end of 2009 literary agent Jane Smith notes that:

To begin with we were selling e-book rights of fifty percent to go to the writer and now publishers are trying to hammer that down to fifteen percent. We’re trying to get an industry standard of twenty to twenty-five percent. All that’s being hammered out on a daily basis at the moment so we don’t want to say “no, our author’s books aren’t available”: we want to make them available – obviously – but we want to revisit it in a few years time.<sup>110</sup>

The financial implications of the future of publishing in the digital age are likely to have a massive effect on viable commercial forms of writing, assuming that the pattern of

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<sup>107</sup>Philip Jones, ‘Apple confirms rule change over e-book apps’, *Thebookseller.com*, 2 February 2011 <<http://www.thebookseller.com/news/apple-confirms-rule-change-over-e-book-apps.html>>, [accessed 3 February 2011].

<sup>108</sup>Lisa Campbell, ‘BA hails “seminal” OFT investigation’, 3 February 2011, *Thebookseller.com*, <http://www.thebookseller.com/news/ba-hails-seminal-oft-investigation.html>>, [accessed 3 February 2011].

<sup>109</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup>Smith, ‘Interview 1 – Jane Smith’, Appendix B.

market dictating form discussed in Chapters One and Two continues to link the book with its means of production and dissemination.

### **Reality bytes**

Before turning to look at the digital presentation and impact of paratext, it is important to consider the implications of a book changing from a printed, bound entity to an electronic one. The boundaries of definition between a printed book and an e-book are already very different, even though the majority of literary fiction is either accessible in print or in print and as an e-book, rather than solely as an e-book. If publishers move towards producing books solely as e-books, then the text will be edited for the format from the first draft onwards and writers may choose to take advantage of research into changing reading styles and interface interactions. It is at this point that the market for the e-book will be likely to have a stronger impact on the forms being written than at the moment, where there is still a cultural precedence given to the printed book. It should be noted that in 2010 *The Bookseller's* third annual survey of UK consumer reading habits, 'Reading the Future', showed that only 26 percent had heard of a Kindle, only 41 percent knew what a Sony Reader was and 70 percent said they would 'definitely not' or were 'unlikely' to buy any sort of e-reader in the coming year.<sup>111</sup> Apple is well known for being a technological game changer and it is interesting that in the same survey 60

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<sup>111</sup>Tom Tivnan, 'The dedicated e-reader: already toast', *Futurebook.net*, 25 May 2010, <<http://www.futurebook.net/content/dedicated-e-reader-already-toast>>, [accessed 26 January 2011].



percent had heard of the iPad even though the majority of the survey took place in March, almost three months ahead of the UK launch.<sup>112</sup> The iPad has the advantage over current e-reader technology since it offers a full colour screen alongside integrated audio, image, applications, and internet browsing and as such attracts a wider user base than a dedicated e-reader. If the industry moves in the direction of non-dedicated e-readers, then it is feasible that the form of the book as we know it will become equally non-dedicated to plain text. If e-books do lead to the apocalyptic demise of the printed book to the extent that the MP3 has to the CD – and the CD to tape, tape to vinyl – in the music industry, then it is likely that our expectations of what a book does and how it does it will change markedly.

In the same way that the iTunes single-track download option has changed the music industry's view of the album, the option to download a single story could change our concept and valuation of the short story. January 2011 saw the launch of the 'Kindle Singles,' typically between 5,000 and 30,000 words each, according to the *Amazon.com* website, each 'Kindle Single presents a compelling idea – well researched, well argued, and well illustrated – expressed at its natural length.'<sup>113</sup> Without the cost of binding and print-runs forcing the short story to be collated into a book of similar length to a novel for financial reasons, it is possible that the single, autonomous story will find a natural place in the public consciousness. The low costs means that customers are happier to take risks: as literary agent Jane Smith says, 'If you've got fifty-nine pence you might just—like for

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<sup>112</sup>Ibid.

<sup>113</sup>'Kindle Singles: Compelling Ideas Expressed at Their Natural Length', *Amazon.com*, <<http://www.amazon.com/b?ie=UTF8&node=2486013011>>, [accessed 26 January 2011].

an iPod app – give that a go.’<sup>114</sup> In a similar fashion, *The Sunday Times* and Fourth Estate have launched a selection of short stories as digital downloads, saying that:

Recognising a renaissance in the short story, and having seen how individual iTunes track downloads have already revolutionised the way we consume music, the Fast Fiction project offers readers the chance to choose, download and start reading short stories from acclaimed authors in as little as 60 seconds at a cost of between 99p and £1.99, depending on length.<sup>115</sup>

Without the physical presence on the bookshelf to lead customers to question a slender volume’s value for money, short sequences, flash fiction collections, and novellas may find a new lease of life since ‘[t]he received wisdom is that you can sell a novel but it has got to be at least sixty thousand words because it has got to look sizable on the shelf. Otherwise people don’t want to buy something that doesn’t look good value for money, even though publishers use lots of tricks like big typeface and thick paper. But it would be a very rare consumer who scrolled ahead and said “oh, it’s only thirty thousand words, I’m not going to bother.”’<sup>116</sup>

It is difficult to talk about forms of literature on the internet and other digital applications without becoming instantly outdated. As Dr Ailsa Cox points out, ‘In the early 90s there were some interesting experiments in hypertext by people like Michael Joyce - forms of writing which are also forms of visual art. Robert Coover said that electronic literature was the future, the book was dead, and a lot of discussions and

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<sup>114</sup>Smith, ‘Interview 1 – Jane Smith’, Appendix B.

<sup>115</sup>‘Fast Fiction – from 0 to short story in 60 seconds’, *The literary platform.com*, 31 January 2011, <<http://www.theliteraryplatform.com/2011/01/fast-fiction-from-0-to-short-story-in-60-seconds%E2%80%A6/>>, [accessed 4 February 2011].

<sup>116</sup>Smith, ‘Interview 1 – Jane Smith’, Appendix B.

projects were launched which have now disappeared into the ether.’<sup>117</sup> For this reason, my discussion on the definition of the book in the digital age will be restricted to e-books since they are most closely related to the printed books with which they share text. New platform literary experiments for disseminating fictional content on the internet – such as online magazines – are providing a wide variety of platforms for new writers to experiment and share their work. However, these online platforms rarely offer payment for the work they publish, and as such have little impact on commercial markets. It is to be hoped that research into the shape(s) of fiction in the future will take into consideration this relationship between viable revenue streams and literary output. There is also fertile ground for research into the space between the book and the computer game, with many professional fiction writers beginning to find work in the gaming industry due to the linking factor of intricate narratives.<sup>118</sup> This can be seen in film and comic tie-ins with the gaming industry, and both writers and publishers are beginning to investigate multi-platform reading experiences, which move epitextual ‘extra features’ into the text itself. Describing his multi-platform digital book *Level 26: Dark Origins* (2009), Anthony Zuiker – creator of *Crime Scene Investigation* – says that ‘whether you read, or listen, every 20 pages you're offered a 'cyber-bridge' where you can log onto the *Level26.com* Website, enter a code, and watch a three minute movie with high production-values and actors you will actually recognize. The film enhances, but does not

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<sup>117</sup>Cox, ‘Interview 2 – Dr Ailsa Cox’, Appendix B.

<sup>118</sup>For an example of this, see ‘Melding Storytelling and Social Gaming’ by Sam Missingham on *FutureBook.net*, 3 February 2011, <http://futurebook.net/content/melding-storytelling-and-social-gaming-0>, [accessed 4 February 2011].

advance, the story.’<sup>119</sup> However, reviewer Tom Alderman notes that *Level 26* is ‘an evolutionary Neanderthal’ compared to publisher Simon & Schuster’s ‘vooks’: e-books ‘you read and watch on only one device - currently an iPhone, iPod Touch or your computer. No Website connection, no special software. Just you, text plus video.’<sup>120</sup> The experience of reading text is integrated with listening and watching audio, changing the focus between active and passive interaction. The question of building reader expectation for a book which is fragmented not only by section breaks but by an active engagement with other media is a whole other thesis, but it should be noted that – as of early 2011 – no such integrated works have received a noted level of either critical or commercial success. There would appear to be an audience preference for single-platform experiences in the entertainment industry – a film, a book, a game – with the experience being enhanced by epitext rather than integrated extras, and tie-ins with a shared diegesis – the book of the film, the film of the game, the game of the film – extending the work in a way I examine in Chapter five.

In an online discussion of the form of Web 2.0 literary journals, John Matthew Fox points out that:

Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, and smart phones are not merely new avenues of disseminating fiction. They create new parameters and challenges for fiction to utilize. The medium matters – there is no such thing as a “neutral” medium. The main mistake readers make is believing that the content is transferable between

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<sup>119</sup>Tom Alderman, ‘All Hail, or Hurl – the Hybrid Book is Here!’, *Huffington Post*, 13 November 2009, <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tom-alderman/all-hail-or-hurl---the-h\\_b\\_356528.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tom-alderman/all-hail-or-hurl---the-h_b_356528.html)>, [accessed 26 January 2011].

<sup>120</sup>Ibid.

mediums – that a story on Twitter is the same as a story on Facebook or on a blog or a cellphone.<sup>121</sup>

Fox also advocates single platform design, seeing the constraint of one medium as a necessity ‘for journals trying to hone in one the heartbeat of a particular genre.’<sup>122</sup> The use of a new platform for dissemination necessitates a new form of writing: the e-book is designed to take the text of a printed book and access it through digital technology, and manufacturers are still struggling to find satisfactory means of delivering fiction without the physical friction of the printed page.

Reviewing the Kindle 2 for *The New Yorker* in 2009, Nicholson Baker expresses his disappointment in the visual aesthetics:



The problem was not that the screen was in black-and-white; if it had really been black-and-white, that would have been fine. The problem was that the screen was gray. And it wasn't just gray; it was a greenish, sickly gray. A postmortem gray. The resizable typeface, Monotype Caecilia, appeared as a darker gray. Dark gray on paler greenish gray was the palette of the Amazon Kindle. This was what they were calling e-paper? This four-by-five window onto an overcast afternoon? Where was paper white, or paper cream? Forget RGB or CMYK. Where were sharp black letters laid out like lacquered chopsticks on a clean tablecloth?<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup>John Matthew Fox, ‘New Platforms for Literary Journals’, *BookFox*, 11 May 2010, <<http://www.thejohnfox.com/bookfox/2010/05/new-platforms-for-literary-journals.html>>, [accessed 26 January 2011].

<sup>122</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup>Nicholson Baker, ‘A New Page: Can the Kindle really improve on the book?’, *New Yorker*, 3 August 2009, <[http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/08/03/090803fa\\_fact\\_baker?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/08/03/090803fa_fact_baker?currentPage=all)>, [accessed 26 January 2011].

In her discussion of the paratext of printed books, Baverstock singles out the effect of cover design creating a sense of expectation in the purchaser and notes that if these expectations are misleading then they may result in a sense of alienation, and a disinclination to purchase similar titles in the future.<sup>124</sup> This sense of alienation is experienced both at the level of the commercial buyer as well as the individual customer, as both rely strongly on the cover paratext to save time and effort in their purchasing decisions.<sup>125</sup> In an analysis of individual purchasing habits, she notes the process which can be observed in any bookshop across Britain on a daily basis: ‘if you watch how customers in a bookshop assess a new title, you will see that the almost general sequence is look at the front cover, turn to the back for basic information on the title, and if this looks sufficiently interesting, to flick through the contents or read the first couple of pages.’<sup>126</sup> Dedicated e-readers strip away this paratextual interaction in a similar fashion to purchasing print books online, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

Digital presentation also offers the potential for readers to bypass authorial intention in the presentation of the text, allowing them to – for example – change font size through the zoom function. It is conceivable that future e-readers will allow readers to shuffle the order of a collection of short stories, perhaps even to collate spliced narratives and impose a linear reading experience on them. Carefully crafted a-chronological plots could be un-jumbled, typeface selected to enhance the content of the text could be switched with the click of a button, and the passivity of pattern recognition

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<sup>124</sup>Baverstock, p. 95.

<sup>125</sup>Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>126</sup>Ibid, p. 95.

discussed in Chapter one could be replaced with an active determination of textual presentation selected according to a reader's personal preferences. While the book jacket does not exist for an e-reader, books still have an equivalent graphic, similar to the 'album cover' in iTunes Cover Flow, to assist with their visual presence. In the age of cut-and-paste, it would be relatively easy for customisable editions of book graphics to become standard. It is a small step from this to seeing how the content of the text could become equally customisable: don't like a character's name? Choose your own. Don't like the ending? Download one of three alternatives from the publisher's website. Don't like the title? Visit our Facebook group and vote for your favourite replacement.

Moving into the realm of speculation it is easy to see what advantages these potential changes offer specific forms. For example, the advent of downloadable single stories could lead to playlist-style anthologies, encouraging readers to share their choices with their friends via social networking and encouraging readers to access a more diverse authorship. It would be quick, easy and cheap to assemble a themed digital anthology from pre-existing texts in reaction to international news events, to tie-in with popular culture or to feature in celebrity interviews. Audiobook distributors are already starting to investigate the Spotify model, and integrated print/audio tie-ins are a natural progression. However, the integrity of a text is disturbed by allowing readers to interfere with the paratext, taking away from carefully considered editorial decisions such as the wording of the title, which may not make sense at first glance but which – over the course of reading the entire book – add to the layers of comprehension and satisfaction of the book as a whole.

### Back to the future

For the publishing industry, the digital age would appear to be synonymous with the age of uncertainty. As Jane Smith noted in 2009:

[W]e're in a new situation and we've got to respond to that. Readers have got to respond and writers have got to respond, agents have and publishers to work out how we can get the best books into the hands of readers. Whether it's an e-book or a download or whatever.<sup>127</sup>

At the beginning of 2011 the industry is still weighing options of response. As seen earlier this chapter, publishing houses attempting to take the initiative with agency pricing models are being investigated over questions of fair competition, and manufacturers are at odds with access providers over who should be paid what cut and when. In an article on *Guardian.co.uk*, Benedicte Page reports that '[h]ow far the shift to ebooks will go, and how speedily, is still unclear, but at this week's Digital Book World conference in New York, publishers were predicting that 2014 will be the year when ebooks reach parity with print for the first time.'<sup>128</sup> While *Amazon.com* are generally reluctant to release sales figures, it was reported at the end of January 2011 that Kindle e-books have overtaken paperback sales at *Amazon.com* for the first time as 'for every 100 paperback books Amazon has sold, the company has sold 115 Kindle books. This

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<sup>127</sup>Smith, 'Interview 1 – Jane Smith', Appendix B.

<sup>128</sup>Benedicte Page, 'Ebook revolution accelerates in sales and status', *Guardian.co.uk*, 28 January 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/jan/28/ebook-revolution-accelerates-sales>>, [accessed 4 February 2011].



includes sales of books where there is no Kindle edition.’<sup>129</sup> These American sales figures do not take into consideration marketing factors such as vastly discounted/ free e-book downloads, and both e-book and e-reader sales in the UK lag significantly behind their American counterparts. It is safe to assume that in this age of bits and bytes the digital text and the e-book will result in a changed encounter between reader and text; the resulting effect on the publishing industry and the production and reception of hybrid texts is less clear.

Initial predictions that e-publishing would lead to the end of the printed book have now been modified: publishers entering books into the Man Booker Prize in 2011 were asked to make all submissions available both in print and digitally since – in the words of Man Booker administrator Ion Trewin – ‘[t]raditionally we rely on proofs and hard copies, but it seemed to me if publishers were in a position to supply us with electronic downloads any earlier, it would help because time is of the essence. And it gives the judges an alternative. This is what the Kindle will do – it's not going to take over from print, but will offer another way of reading as well.’<sup>130</sup> Expectations of internet-based literary projects are also beginning to be cut back to more reasonable levels since, as Ailsa Cox points out, ‘[c]yberspace is in some respects even more transitory than the printed book, which, as we know, goes out of print overnight, and drops to bits in your

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<sup>129</sup>Lisa Campbell, ‘Kindle Sales outstrip paperbacks as Amazon has first \$10bn quarter’, *Thebookseller.com*, 28 January 2011, <<http://www.thebookseller.com/news/kindle-sales-outstrip-paperbacks-amazon-has-first-10bn-quarter.html>>, [accessed 4 February 2011].

<sup>130</sup>Quoted by Benedicte Page in ‘Ebook revolution accelerates in sales and status’, *Guardian.co.uk*, 28 January 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/jan/28/ebook-revolution-accelerates-sales>>, [accessed 4 February 2011].

hand.’<sup>131</sup> Perhaps more worrying are the implications of abuse of fair usage and digital content value: the music industry has been hit heavily by illegal file sharing, and news providers are struggling to access audiences willing to pay for online content when they perceive it as being available for free elsewhere. On 1 February 2011, Culture Secretary Jeremy Hunt announced that the Digital Economy Act would be reviewed, further delaying the implementation of measures intended to ‘protect our creative economy from online copyright infringement, which industry estimates costs them £400 million a year.’<sup>132</sup> While digitisation of archives and libraries has benefited public accessibility inestimably, schemes such as the Icelandic Literature project – where the 50,000 books comprising Iceland’s literature will be scanned by 12 people over 2 years and made freely available online – engage with questions of value and copyright: if people are not paying to access the text of books, who pays the editors, authors and other persons involved with the production of the text? If authors cannot guarantee a fair income from their writing then the quality of their output will suffer as they are forced to find alternate sources of income and are able to spend less time writing and refining their work. Accessed through whichever format, it is necessary for texts to generate a revenue for professional writers in order for the UK’s literary culture to remain a sustainable player on the international cultural stage.

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<sup>131</sup>Cox, ‘Interview 2 – Dr Ailsa Cox’, Appendix B.

<sup>132</sup>Charlotte Williams, ‘PA opposes review of Digital Economy Act’, *Thebookseller.com*, 2 February 2011, <<http://www.thebookseller.com/news/pa-opposes-review-digital-economy-act.html>>, [accessed 4 February 2011].

The reception of a text – whether in print, e-pub or online – is greatly affected by the expectation built up by associated marketing and other paratext. If a reader is expecting a novel-esque submersive reading experience and is provided with a more challenging series of transitions between different sections then they are likely to be disappointed and frustrated. The links between individual stories can create a continuity of plot as expected from a novel: a reader expecting stimulating diversity between a collection of stories may be equally disappointed and frustrated to read what could be perceived as a sequence of chapters rather than stories. Paratextual signposts within the text are the best indicator for categorising how to approach the book, but increasingly external factors are having a huge effect on the reception of the text. As David Lodge has noted, ‘[t]he reception of new writing has in fact probably never been more obsessively author-centred than it is today, not only in reviewing but in supplementary forms of exposure through the media’: the role of the author has become an important issue in contemporary position, not only in marketing the final product, but also the role of the author as a character within the pages of the text itself.<sup>133</sup> In a novel-centric discussion of print versus online fiction in *Prospect*, Julian Gough says that:

the internet is rapidly becoming Borges’s library of Babel, Rushdie’s sea of stories: everything is turning up there, in potential promiscuous intercourse with everything else. Everything is happening all at once, in the same place, with no hierarchy. It’s as though space and time have collapsed. It’s exhilarating, and frightening. Who’s capturing that in the novel? Because the novel is the place to capture it. The novel has freedoms which television has not. It can shape and structure multiplicity and chaos in ways the internet cannot.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup>David Lodge, ‘The Novel Now’, *Metafiction*, ed. Mark Currie, (London & New York: Longman, 1995), Pp. 145-160, (p.150).

<sup>134</sup>Julian Gough, ‘Divine Comedy’, *Prospect*, 26 May 2007,

In the following chapter I return to a discussion of the contemporary printed book, and discuss theoretical approaches to this freedom to express which is characteristic of fictional texts.

## Chapter four

A text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination

Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*

Diegesis in fictional prose narratives exists as a contract of trust between the reader and the text. Through the willing suspension of belief, the reader enters the alternative fictional reality of the text. To help them on their way, the text attempts to create a sense of expectation in the reader so that they gain satisfaction through the fulfilment of these expectations. A word out of place, a genre indicator gone astray or an unconvincing set-piece can be enough to put the reader off and then the book is back on the shelf, discarded in favour of a more promising title. As seen in the last chapter, when first encountered – whether in a television advert or on a bookshelf – books elicit both a conscious and a subliminal response. Preconceptions of what a book *is* depend on the reader's cultural background and what forms and genres of literature they have encountered: these contextualise the reading experience. Readers are likely to be suspicious of things which cannot be easily categorised: more comfortable with the known than the unknown.

The strong correlations between the means of production, the market for dissemination, and the length of a piece of prose have already been discussed in Chapter two, as have the value-judgements attached to labels such as novel, novella, novelette, short story and short fiction. This chapter questions the use of such labels in the context of theoretical work rather than the commercial marketplace. It expands on Chapter one's

introduction to the key terms monotext and polytext as a method of approaching fictional prose narratives through a structural rather than content-based reading. Building on the work of existing theorists in the field of hybrid prose works, such as Forrest L Ingram, it moves Bakhtin's theories on the scope of the novel into a discussion on the natural boundaries between works of prose of various lengths. With an emphasis on the material presentation of the book by the contemporary British publishing industry as a mode of creating reader-expectation, it seeks a wider theoretical context for approaching hybrid works of fiction.

### **The death of genre**

The two most widely used categories of fictional prose narratives are the short story and the novel, but there is no critical consensus on where the boundaries are drawn up between the two beyond a sense of 'we know it when we see it.' The attitude towards defining the boundaries of short fiction in early short story theory is reminiscent of Walter Besant and Henry James' early theoretical work on the novel: defensive stances taken against potential attacks on a 'new' and therefore 'lesser' genre in which Art is pitted unfavourably against commercial success.<sup>135</sup> As James so humorously sums the frustrating situation up in response to Besant, '[d]uring the period I have alluded to there was a comfortable, good humoured feeling abroad that a novel is a novel, as a pudding is a pudding, and that our only business with it could be to swallow it.'<sup>136</sup> By over-debating the theoretical use of phrases such as 'novelette', 'short fiction' and 'prose tale' as

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<sup>135</sup>Walter Besant, *The Art of Fiction*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1902), p. 76.

<sup>136</sup>James, pp. 3-4.

alternatives to 'short story', rather than investigating the application of new forms of critical approach, short fiction theory runs the risk of remaining sidelined as a minor strand of narrative poetics rather than being accepted as a valuable and central resource in the debate over how narratives can be analysed. It is my contention that the discussion of the boundaries of short fiction would strongly benefit from the application of theories of the novel, where genre-categories are separated thematically and structurally. For example, few people would now contest that Realism is a tendency within the novel, rather than a requirement in the way that theorists such as Charles E. May and Valerie Shaw see the thematic contents of short fiction as immutably linked with the structure of the form.<sup>137</sup>

In looking for a methodology of approaching the boundaries between fictions of differing lengths, I find an answer in M. M. Bakhtin's essay 'Epic and Novel' (1981). Bakhtin describes the novel as the only major genre younger than the book, saying that 'it alone is organically receptive to new forms of mute perception, that is, to reading.'<sup>138</sup> This relationship between the novel and its means of production, dissemination and reception is, for Bakhtin, key in understanding the genre. The relationship between a work of prose and its reader can be said to be the factor which separates it from poetry and drama: it is a silent, interior relationship. Designed to take place in the mind rather

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<sup>137</sup> Shaw and May both take a reductively thematic approach to defining the boundaries of the short story throughout their critical work, as can be seen in Shaw's *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Longman, 1983) and May's *The Short Story: The Reality of Artifice* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>138</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays By M.M. Bakhtin*, trans. Michael Holquist, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), pp. 3-40, (p.3).

than on the stage, it is entirely a personal rather than a public experience. It is a simple step to extend this concept to include short fiction: the short story, the novella, and all other lengths of fictional prose narratives shorter than the novel. As already seen, they too belong to this younger genre of prose fiction and arrived in their modern forms at the same time as the novel: their lengths are determined by their means of dissemination and their popularity by the financial constraints of their means of production. They are received in the same way: mutely, in print. Bakhtin's comments in 'Epic and Novel' are therefore equally apt when applied to the other fictional prose narratives since they share the ability to encompass, to mimic, and to satirise. This is why I disagree with critics such as May and Shaw when they attempt to define short fiction through theme and content since there is a demonstrable difference between a genre's tendencies and its boundaries. Terms such as 'novel' and 'short story' belong to structural genres and terms such as 'realism' and 'romance' to thematic genres: specific categories within the more generalised, umbrella-like structural genre.

Although Bakhtin's theories for a poetics of the novel can be logically extended to create a poetics of prose, there is still an instinctive recognition of difference between a short story and a novel. In 'What Makes a Short Story Short' (1958), Norman Friedman identifies this difference as rooted in the length of the text, and revisits this idea at length in 'Recent Short Story Theories: Problems in Definition' (1989), saying that 'the only thing on a common-sense level that distinguishes novel reading from short story reading is that the reader is bound to recall more of the details in the short story than in the novel,



mainly because of the way memory works in relation to quantity and duration.’<sup>139</sup> The time taken to read a piece of short fiction and the time taken to read a novel creates a different relationship between reader and text. Rather than imposing an arbitrary word-count boundary between short fiction and the novel, I follow Edgar Allan Poe’s widely adopted division where – to paraphrase his seminal essay ‘The Philosophy of Composition’ (1846) – a short story can be defined by it requiring the length of one sitting to read and take in.<sup>140</sup> By extension, a novel requires more than one sitting and the two forms can be distinguished at the point of reception through the experience of the reader.

### **Cycle paths**

The most clearly identified – and therefore theorised – form of hybrid fiction recognised in by critical theory is the short story cycle. Story cycles take the polytextual short story collection and – through and enhancement of intertextual and intratextual links – move it further along the scale towards the monotext. While each narrative section still works as an individual piece, they also work in harmony when juxtaposed. The continuation of, for example, a theme, setting or character creates an alternative fictional reality shared between the fictions, making it easier for the reader to pass from one to the next. This

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<sup>139</sup>Norman Friedman, ‘Recent Short Story Theories: Problems in Definition’, *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, ed. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey, (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), pp. 13- 31 (p. 25).

<sup>140</sup>Edgar Allan Poe, ‘The Philosophy of Composition’, *Literature Online*, <<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>>, [accessed 26 January 2011].

link between the fictions creates the impression that the book has a plot running from beginning to end: that it is a monotext, like a novel.

Works falling between a collection of short fiction and a novel have not been the subject of extensive critical analysis until fairly recent times. When recognised as distinct from either a collection of short fiction or a novel by reviewers and critics, they have gone by a variety of labels, including:

[S]tory cycle, short story cycle, multi-faceted novel, story novel, paranovel, loose-leaf novel, short story composite, rovelle, composite, short story compound, integrated short story collection, anthology novel, modernist grotesque, hybrid novel, story chronicle, short story sequence, genre of return, short story volume, narrative of community.<sup>141</sup>

Forrest L. Ingram's seminal work *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century* (1971) calls such a hybrid work a 'short story cycle', defining it as 'a set of stories linked to each other in such a way as to maintain a balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit.'<sup>142</sup> Due to the impact of Ingram's work on later scholarship in this area, both his definition and his label are useful in marking the halfway point between a collection of short fiction and a novel and will be made use of in preference to other terms, to mark the halfway point on the scale between a novel and an unthemed/linked collection of short fictions.

Ingram puts a strong emphasis on external authorial intention, such as letters to publishers, in justifying his categorisation of certain books as short story cycles. Similarly, in *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of*

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<sup>141</sup>Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), p. 4.

<sup>142</sup>Forrest L Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), p. 15.

*Genre* (2001) James Nagel develops Ingram's definition of the short story cycle, stating that 'each contributing unit of the work be an independent narrative episode, and that there be some principle of unification that gives structure, movement and thematic development to the whole.'<sup>143</sup> Nagel looks to the reception of such books by contemporary reviewers to give his evaluations weight. While both critics provide plausible and intelligent reasons for approaching their primary texts as short story cycles, this reliance on external evidence – what Genette terms 'epitext' – to prove an internal function of the book is less productive in formulating a methodology for the short story cycle than an analysis more concentrated on peritextual substantiation. Susan Garland Mann's *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide* (1989) pays more attention to textual-based analysis, leading to a questioning of the techniques used to separate the short story cycle from the novel, noting that '[t]he world of the novel continues as soon as the reader turns to the next chapter, unlike the world of the short story, which no longer exists after the last sentence.'<sup>144</sup> Mann agrees with Ingram in her basic definition of the short story cycle, but goes further in beginning to ask questions relating to the stylistic technicalities which signpost both overall unity and sectional autonomy in the books, claiming that, 'there is only one essential characteristic of the short story cycle: the stories are both self-sufficient and interrelated.'<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>143</sup>James Nagel, *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), p. 2.

<sup>144</sup>Mann, Susan Garland, *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), p. 18.

<sup>145</sup>*Ibid*, p. 15.

*The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* (1995) by Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris illustrates the necessity of considering short stories and novels through a sliding scale which emphasises their communality rather than viewing them as separate, distinct structural genres. Disagreeing with both Ingram and Mann in the labelling of the short story cycle, Dunn and Morris re-label these works as ‘composite novels’ and justify the change since the term ‘composite novel emphasizes the integrity of the whole, while short story cycle emphasizes the integrity of the parts.’<sup>146</sup> Their definition of the composite novel is largely the same as that of Ingram’s short story cycle, seeing it as ‘a literary work composed of shorter texts that – though individually complete and autonomous – are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles.’<sup>147</sup> Likewise, Dunn and Morris understand the differing experience of the reader between a novel and a collection of short fiction corroborates with Mann’s. However, Dunn and Morris see their change in terminology as highlighting an important ideological shift in approaching these hybrid works, suggesting that the reader’s preference for novels is related to a desire to make connections and thus make sense of the world and that ‘this need to make connections is frustrated by a collection of unrelated stories because a reader must constantly begin over again, starting anew with each story, and literally becomes exhausted in the process.’<sup>148</sup> This shift towards an alliance with the novel rather than a collection of short fiction can be seen as a significant shift along the sliding scale in favour of the monotextual experience both in terms of a

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<sup>146</sup>Dunn and Morris, p. 7.

<sup>147</sup>Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>148</sup>Ibid, p. 5.

methodological approach to the texts and also through an explicit dismissal of the critical and cultural value of the short story collection. The changes this brings leads to an uncertainty over the definition, since the classification of the individual narrative sections and their autonomy becomes thrown into doubt, despite this being a prerequisite of Dunn and Morris' own definition. Although Dunn and Morris raise interesting questions over the use of titles and chapter headings, they do not put forward a convincing argument for the reclassification of the short story cycle. Rather, they highlight the many ways in which collections of short fiction, short story cycles and novels can differ from each other, and thus the necessity for an analysis of the different devices and effects which lead to a work being classified and studied under such headings. Through an application of Genette's work on paratext to hybrid fiction, this thesis aims to extend the theories of the short story cycle proposed by critics such as Ingram.

### **Peri(lous)text**

Critical attention has clustered around the two ends and the middle of the sliding scale between mono and poly-texts, and attempted to provide a methodology for the three sections as separate structural genres. While the concept of the sliding scale intrinsically links the sections together as one genre, there must be recognition of the technical devices in these works which lead them to be classified and studied as different genres. These narrative strategies are used to divide the text into sections, and to signpost to the reader the type of break intended: whether to expect a short or lengthy submersion into an alternative, fictional reality. While themes, motifs, recurring characters and locations –

what Ingram calls ‘the dynamic pattern of recurrent development’ – are central in creating a sense of unification specific to individual works, they are supported by the physical presentation of the text, such as the use of chapter numbers rather than individual story titles.<sup>149</sup> The almost subliminal effect of the visual presentation of the text is thus key in aligning the work in question on the sliding scale of narrative approach.

Each book works on its own, internal dynamics. We can’t say if a book is ‘successful’ without reading it, and considering the success of the interaction between both the thematic and the structural genres. Even if the term being used is not a perfect fit, there is a general desire to classify in order to comprehend; according to Genette in *Palimpsests* (1982), every genre is a generalisation.<sup>150</sup> Changing the labels we give things, the categories we group them into, alters our perception of the item itself and the way in which we relate to it, even though the item in question does not change materially. Paratextual elements such as the cover design of a book, its title, or a list of other works by the same author create a set of expectations which the reader expects to be either met or cleverly subverted when the text itself is read. In signposting to the reader the mono- or poly-textual tendencies of the book they are about to experience, the paratext can be both the lock and the key to the text. As already demonstrated, the paratext can be used to contextualise the different diegetic levels of the book: to ‘lock down’ the relation of one

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<sup>149</sup>Ingram, p. 203.

<sup>150</sup>Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky, (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 85.

section to another. However, the paratext can also be used as a key to open up new readings and suggestions of connections and continuations.

The title is usually the first part of the book to be read. It is the ‘first generic signal that the reader receives.’<sup>151</sup> While Mann admits that the practice is becoming less common, she notes that ‘collections that are not cycles have traditionally been named after a single story to which the phrase “and other stories” is appended.’<sup>152</sup> The phrase ‘and other stories’ as a subtitle automatically creates an expectation of un-linked, autonomous pieces contained within the book. It reinforces the autonomy of the individual stories since no over-arching title is placed above them: there is no suggestion that the whole is greater than the combination of the parts. For example, Ali Smith’s *Free Love: and other stories* (1995) is a collection of short fiction, with the titular story as the first in the collection. All the stories in Smith’s debut collection share a preoccupation with relationships as indicated by the title, where the autonomous title of the first story serves as the basis of the title for the collection, thus setting the tone for continuity between the different stories: both the autonomy of the stories and the intratextual connections between them are enforced in the title, alongside the book’s polytextuality. In comparison, the subtitle for David Mitchell’s *Ghostwritten: A Novel in Nine Parts* (1999) bolsters the presentation of the nine fictions as a mono-text: it suggests to the reader that the sections are to be read as parts of the whole rather than as individual pieces. Whereas the autonomy of each of the fictions in *Free Love* is complete, in *Ghostwritten* the arc of unity of the book is given greater privilege than the arc of unity

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<sup>151</sup>Mann, p. 14.

<sup>152</sup>Ibid, p. 14.

within the individual section. As Genette points out, the authorial intention signified in the title is a plea rather than a command, as ‘*a novel*’ does not signify “This book is a novel,” a defining assertion that hardly lies within anyone’s power, but rather “Please look on this book as a novel.”<sup>153</sup>

A collection of stories without the titular appendage ‘and other stories’ will usually be named after a major factor of unity between the stories such as geographic location or a recurring motif, for example Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* (2009). This not only nudges the reader in the direction of considering the links between the stories, but it is also a statement of unity: the implication is that the title refers to the effect created by the combination of the individual stories in one book. While in *Paratexts* Genette only touches briefly on the titles of collections of short fiction, he does note that ‘collections of novellas, for example, are apt to conceal their nature with an absence of genre indication’ in contrast with an increasing tendency for books to lay claim to the genre of ‘novel, which today is rid of all its complexes and is universally said to be more of a “seller” than any other genre.’<sup>154</sup>

Dunn and Morris debate the use of words such as ‘stories’ ‘tales’ and ‘chronicles’ in the title since ‘the titles alone are ambiguous as to whether the books constitute integrated whole texts or collections.’<sup>155</sup> While the use of words such as ‘tales’ highlights the episodic content of the work, it does not indicate whether the tales have an

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<sup>153</sup>Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 11. Italics in original.

<sup>154</sup>Ibid, p. 97.

<sup>155</sup>Dunn and Morris, p. 12.



autonomous status outside of the book as well as contributing to the sense of unity within it. For example, the title of Patricia Duncker's *Seven Tales of Sex and Death* (2003) emphasises the autonomy of the seven stories in the collection alongside the thematic links in their subject matter.

A monotext is liable, like the short fiction cycle, to proclaim its sense of unity in its title through a reinforcing of – for example – one or more central characters such as Julian Barnes' *Arthur & George* (2005), or setting such as Paul Torday's *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* (2007). Different historical periods have their own fashions for titles, and a contemporary monotext is likely to play with these past fashions as well as employing contemporary styles. The resonances of not only the choice of title, but also its presentation with subheadings, etc. evoke certain literary styles. Andrew Crumey's *Mobius Dick* (2004) plays with the reader's pre-knowledge of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851). The title of A.S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990) uses the eighteenth century convention of naming the thematic genre of writing in the title: this ties in with the historical aspects of the novel itself. Tynyanov sees this as part of the continual assimilation of younger genres within the main literary genre: a monotext can easily use what we would initially recognise as a polytextual title in order to play with the reader's preconceptions.<sup>156</sup> Since 'every [...] title in a work of literature is a designation which plays with all the hues of which it is capable' this works both ways; a short fiction collection can use a title which suggests unity in order to play market forces at their own

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<sup>156</sup>Tynyanov, p. 45.

game.<sup>157</sup> As previously discussed, publishers and bookshops consider short fiction to be harder to market than other books – and are therefore wary of the commercial value of short fiction collections – it may therefore be expedient for short fiction writers to use a more monotextual title in order to get their collection both published and marketed in the mainstream.

The blurb and reviews chosen for the book jacket play an important role in building up the reader's expectations of not only content but also form. Often the author or publisher's intentions for the status of the book are clearly stated, for example the blurb on the back cover of Ali Smith's *Like* (1997) refers to the book as her first novel. When *Like* was first published Smith had already published a critically acclaimed book of short fiction, *Free Love* (1995) and had built her reputation as a writer of short stories. A reader already familiar with Smith's work might assume further publications to be collections of short stories, hence the necessity to emphasise the book's status as a novel: the peritext is utilised to correct expectations built by pre-existing epitext. Smith's two later novels *Hotel World* (2001) and *The Accidental* (2005) are explicitly referred to as novels on their back covers, and her three further collections of short stories *Other Stories and Other Stories* (1999), *The Whole Story and Other Stories* (2003) and *The First Person and Other Stories* (2008) are categorised there as short story collections. While this functions as a signpost for the reader's expectations, it is also an important marketing tactic. Since one in six readers see short story collections as harder to read than other books – as seen in the 2004 research into the short story in the UK – Smith

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<sup>157</sup>Ibid, p. 45.

originally ran the risk of her novels being passed over due to her established reputation as a short story writer.<sup>158</sup> By emphasising the difference in form in her publishing repertoire, Smith connects to a wider commercial audience. As Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg have pointed out, ‘our view of narrative literature is almost hopelessly novel-centred. The expectations which readers bring to narrative literary works are based on their experience with the novel. Their assumptions about what a narrative should be are derived from their understanding of the novel.’<sup>159</sup> A book of fictional prose which doesn’t contain a clear signifier of uncommon intent in the form of the title, subtitle or blurb is predisposed to be approached with the expectation that the reader will enjoy the kind of immersive reading experience typical of the novel. Narratives which differ from this experience without allowing the reader due warning in the form of paratextual signposts are therefore likely to be deemed unsatisfactory, unstructured and confusing.

Whilst the epitext of authorial intentions during the composition and editing process of the book is interesting from a socio-historical/ biographical viewpoint, it is only the finished book which the reader receives: it cannot be assumed that the reader will have access to – or interest in – this epitext. To counteract this, notes from the author, bibliographies, and biographical details are often inserted before the text to add to the expectations of the reader already established by the paratext of the book jacket and enforce and epitextual awareness. Taking as an example Patricia Duncker’s *Seven Tales of Sex and Death* – which includes review quotes on both front and back covers, as well

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<sup>158</sup>‘The Short Story in the UK’, p. iv.

<sup>159</sup>Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 8.

as a title explicit about form and content – there is both a biblio-biographical paragraph on the first page, an author’s note, and then a section of acknowledgements. The biblio-biographical detail establishes Duncker’s credentials as a writer of short fiction, novels and critical essays. The author’s note describes the collection as ‘a sequence of linked tales’ and goes on to reiterate that ‘[t]he tales are deliberately linked to one another’ through their exploration of the dark clichés of late-night B-movies.<sup>160</sup> Having underscored the links between the pieces in the author’s note, the acknowledgements section breaks it down by emphasising the autonomy of the separate tales: four of the ‘tales’ have already been published and therefore have a clear, autonomous existence from the main text. Before reading any of the tales themselves, the reader has already undertaken an assault course of information about the status of the tales as examples of autonomous fictional realities versus the metanarrative of the book in its entirety. In *Paratexts*, Genette notes that the preface used to function as a justification of the text’s cultural value – an outward looking, almost epitextual involvement – but that this has developed into a closer relationship with the text itself as ‘since the nineteenth century the functions of enhancing the work’s value have been relatively eclipsed by the functions of providing information and guidance for reading.’<sup>161</sup> In a hybrid work, this allows the author to map the structure of the following text to modify reader expectation or to enhance connections between sections. For example, Sarah Hall included an extract from *The Craftsman’s Handbook* (1437) at the end of *How to Paint a Dead Man* since ‘[I]t felt like an operating key for the writing of the book, and seemed absolutely fitting

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<sup>160</sup>Duncker, pp. vii-viii.

<sup>161</sup>Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 209.

therefore to include it at the end of the novel.’<sup>162</sup> It could be argued that the structurally reflective matryoshka discussions in *Cloud Atlas* and *One Good Turn* – as discussed in Chapter two – take the role of the preface in Mitchell and Atkinson’s texts, one absorbed within the text to avoid being skipped by the reader.

Different editions of the same book may contain different reviews, notes and acknowledgements. Later editions of books which have received extraordinary amounts of critical attention will often contain a scholarly introduction providing a key to the historical production of the book as well as interpretations of the themes and characters of the book. This is often done in terms of a series – such as the Penguin’s Classic lists – which cements the status of the book in question. These addenda are easily skipped or ignored by the reader. The most important and least changing aspect of all these items of peritext can be seen as the title, since it often forms part of the piece itself rather than an external trapping. The title on the book jacket is usually repeated on an inner title page and can often be found on every page of the text as a header. Genette separates the function of the cover title from the function of the intertitles through addressed readership as ‘[t]he title is directed at many more people than the text, people who by one route or another receive it and transmit it and thereby have a hand in circulating it.’<sup>163</sup> In contrast, the intertitles are designed for ‘readers, or at least the already limited public of browsers and readers of tables of contents; and a good many internal titles make sense only to an addressee who is already involved in reading the text, for these internal titles presume

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<sup>162</sup>Hall, ‘Interview 3 – Sarah Hall’, Appendix B.

<sup>163</sup>Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 75.

familiarity with everything that has preceded.’<sup>164</sup> While a title is a given necessity for any text – as a name is for anything to which we wish to refer – intertitles are not.

The convention of dividing books into chapters has been around almost as long as the novel, with Watson noting that ‘the division of novels into chapters becomes common only in the 1790s at least in serious novels; and it is common in English before it becomes so in French.’<sup>165</sup> They are therefore ripe for the self-parodying introspection which forms a central element of literary fiction. For example, Julian Barnes’ *The History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* (1989) not only pokes fun at the concept of an incomplete chapter in the title, but plays with readers’ expectations around stylistics of chapter headings from differing historical periods in the same way that Mitchell does with his parody of literary genres in *Cloud Atlas*. Richard Todd describes *The History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* as ‘not so much a story as a series of stories or even essays laminated or layered over each other, inviting and challenging the reader to make connections but withholding authorial judgment on those connections.’<sup>166</sup> As in *Cloud Atlas*, the pastiche element pushes the text closer towards the monotext end of the scale since it is through an iterative, juxtaposed reading that the individual sections make greatest sense. In both these texts the change from one historical genre to the next provides an intratextual link of anticipated change and continuity; the reader expects continuity in the form of sequential diversity. As Bakhtin notes, ‘we get a mutual

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<sup>164</sup>Ibid, p. 294.

<sup>165</sup>George Watson, *The Story of the Novel*, (London: Macmillan, 1979), p. 65.

<sup>166</sup>Todd, p. 263.

interaction between the world represented in the work and the world outside the work.’<sup>167</sup>

Pre-knowledge of the conventions of these literary stylisations directly contextualises the diegesis of the section within the context of historical events, so that the ‘look’ works in the same fashion as other paratext in building up reader expectation.

Including a table of contents emphasises the methods used to segment the novel. For example, almost every short story collection has a table of contents, which gives the reader the power to read the stories individually rather than sequentially. As Hanson notes, ‘stories are often specifically intended *not* to be read in sequence or order, and the order in which they end up in a collection may often be very largely the publisher’s creation.’<sup>168</sup> This emphasises the autonomy of the separate pieces. The diversity amongst the titles is emphasised. It can, however, also be used to highlight any titular thematic links between the pieces.

Prince, describing peritext as metanarrative signs, suggests an important aspect of these narrative signposts, saying that ‘Metanarrative signs can also show that a series of events belong to the same proairetic sequence and they can name the sequence: think of chapter and section titles which indicate at least one of the meanings of a set of activities in a narrative.’<sup>169</sup> When these ‘metanarrative signs’ are brought together, they give a summary of what is to come, and also what to expect. Where individual sections are

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<sup>167</sup>M.M Bakhtin, ‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel’, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays By M.M. Bakhtin* trans. Michael Holquist, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), pp. 84-258, (p. 255).

<sup>168</sup>Clare Hanson, ‘Introduction’, *Re-reading the Short Story*, ed. Clare Hanson (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 1-9, (p. 7). Italics in original.

<sup>169</sup>Gerald Prince, ‘Metanarrative Signs’, *Metafictions* ed. Mark Currie, (London & New York: Longman, 1995), pp. 55-68, (p. 64).

given both autonomous titles as well as sequential numerical chapter headings, this recognises that while the pieces have a strong sense of autonomy they are intended to be read in a specific order. Whilst the order of reading can make no difference in a collection of unlinked stories, it can make a huge difference in a collection which relies on a certain build-up between stories to create an overarching narrative, that binds the book into one as well as many. Conversely, a lack of numbering questions the necessity of the order in which the pieces are read, suggesting that they are to be experienced individually rather than consecutively, or that the order in which they are read does not have a huge impact upon the intratextual links. These fictions are intended to be read not only separately, but in the light of what has come before: their order become the plot, and the details which connect them accumulate and thus grow throughout the novel, imbuing the book with meaning. The following chapter looks at the affect of paratext on this sense of meaning gained through juxtaposition both within a single book and across an author's *oeuvre*.



## Chapter five

We need poetics because we cannot make sense of any individual text without situating it in terms of other texts and in terms of a repertory of textual possibilities.

Robert Scholes, foreword to *The Architext*

Stories presented in juxtaposition with other stories present a different reading experience from stories presented as individual pieces. The reader of a collection of unlinked stories is expected to enter into an alternative fictional construction of reality, invest in it briefly, and then end that investment. If the story is published as an autonomous piece, the reader is not then expected to repeat the investment in a completely different fictional reality straight afterwards. In a strictly monotextual book, the reader remains in the same diegesis throughout. When using sectioning devices such as jumps in time between chapters, or the introduction of different narratorial viewpoints, the reader must be re-oriented in the new spatio-temporal aspect of the diegesis. This chapter will look at the different forms, structures and methods which contemporary British writers are using in their published works. Through an examination of the presentation of juxtaposition in single works as well the expansion of diegetic boundaries across multiple works, it seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of techniques which authors have drawn upon in order to create hybrid works of fiction, and to open up questions of dialogues between sections of one book to a discussion of dialogues across entire *oeuvres*.

In a strictly polytextual book, each of the autonomous fictions contains its own, entirely separate diegesis. However, the juxtaposition of the fictions within the same set

of covers leads the reader to automatically expect to find links between the fictions, even on a basic stylistic level. These intratextual connections can be played upon through recurring phrases, themes, motifs, characters, and locations in order to create an experience where each new diegesis opens up the previously read fictions in a slightly different fashion. These connections create an arc of unity which binds the book together as a cohesive whole, despite the polytextual autonomy of the individual fictions. The juxtaposition of a variety of consciously linked shorter pieces in this way creates interesting thematic relationships between the pieces, which can approximate the structural and plot-based links which keep the reader in one fictional reality throughout a book, bringing the experience of reading the collection closer to that associated with a monotext. These books can be marketed as novels, thus by-passing the commercial implications of marketing and distributing a collection of short stories. This hybrid space between a collection of unlinked autonomous short pieces and one autonomous book-length text is a reflection of the struggle between artistic values and commercial repercussions.

### **Between the covers**

The question of authorial intention in the ordering of a collection of stories is removed when the text is considered at the point of reception: whatever the author/editor/marketing manager may have intended is only significant if it is interpreted in that fashion by the reader. Seeing stories bound in particular order is subconsciously

received as a form of intended ordering. The reader may choose to subvert the bound order of the stories, but this cannot be taken as a standard reading practise. As Ailsa Cox points out, ‘there is a battle between variety and consistency in the ordering of a collection. A collection is not cumulative, like a novel, and not everyone will read the stories in the order in which they are printed, but it’s still important to strike the right note in the final story.’<sup>170</sup> Likewise, Tania Hershman sees the short story’s relationship with its presentation as a key element in the form’s history of reading since:

[A]s opposed to a longer work, short stories rarely appear in isolation. They are either in a literary magazine or a collection, which means that if the reader isn't compelled to keep reading, he or she knows there is something they might like more and they will move on. Not so in a book-length work, where a reader, I think, will give the work much more time to impress.<sup>171</sup>

When separate sections do not share a clear continuation of plot as part of the unifying principle, the connecting links between the stories become very important. As Scholes and Kellogg have noted, ‘[s]patial art, which presents its materials simultaneously, or in a random order, has no plot; but a succession of similar pictures which can be arranged in a meaningful order [...] begins to have a plot because it begins to have a dynamic sequential existence:’ coincidence becomes a structural device and therefore becomes meaningful when contained in this way, whether intended by the book’s compiler or otherwise.<sup>172</sup>

As seen in the previous chapter, the use of a table of contents as an initial point of orientation – to which the reader can refer throughout the reading of the text, and which

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<sup>170</sup>Cox, ‘Interview 2 – Dr Ailsa Cox’, Appendix B.

<sup>171</sup>Hershman, ‘Interview 4 – Tania Hershman’, Appendix B.

<sup>172</sup>Scholes and Kellogg, p. 207.

may also be used to identify monotextual or polytextual possibilities in skipping sections or reading out of order – can be used to modify and expand reader expectation. For example, Paul Torday's *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* (2007) relies on the table of contents to contribute to the accumulation of bureaucratic effect, and hold the arching narrative of the novel together. The titles of the chapters are clearly linked in their formulaic labelling, and terms such as 'extract', 'interview' and 'email' prepare the reader for the fragmented format to follow. Where individual sections are given both sequential numerical and autonomously titled intertitles in the table of contents – as in Patricia Duncker's *Seven Tales of Sex and Death* and Julian Barnes' *The History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* – this allows a recognition that while the pieces have a strong sense of autonomy they are ultimately intended to be read in a specific order. This creates a certain build-up between stories, so that an overarching narrative binds the book into one as well as many parts. This combining of intertitle intentions functions, according to Hanson, 'to challenge the idea of the book as necessarily unified.'<sup>173</sup> This balancing act between monotextual and polytextual tendencies can be seen in A.S. Byatt's *Angels & Insects* (1992) and Ali Smith's *Like* (1997), two books made up from 'novella' length pieces. The former has a table of contents, labelling the two pieces with autonomous titles and no numbering. The latter has no table of contents. The lack of table of contents suggests that the book will take the typical format of an un-segmented novel, with no 'difficult' time shifts to be mentioned, no sudden changes whose appearance needs to be softened. In actuality, *Like* is as divided as *Angels & Insects*: the importance in the former

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<sup>173</sup>Hanson, p. 7.

is to heighten the sense of unity as it is unification between two parts which forms the heart of the narrative as a whole. The autonomy of each part can also be questioned since – despite autonomously titled intertitles within the text heralding the change in narrative focus – the pieces are not as strong as separate pieces as they are when read in the context of the book: the text loses quality through separation. The latter's pieces stand very much as separate pieces, and gain little for being read in the light of the other, hence no need for sequential numbering in the table of contents, since to read one does not necessitate reading the other.

When there is no table of contents to modify reader expectation, section title pages lose some of their authority as division markers. For example, Ali Smith's books marketed as short story collections contain tables of contents, but her books marketed as novels – *Like*, *Hotel World* (2001) and *The Accidental* (2005) – do not. In *Like* these intertitles are primarily used to indicate a change in narrator, in *Hotel World* they indicate a spatio-temporal change as well as a change of narrator, and in *The Accidental* there are no intertitles, although the text is broken into mute chapters. This change in format between Smith's story collections and her novels shows a different intention towards reading: the connections between the sections of the novels are highlighted whereas the disparity is highlighted in the short story collections. That Smith has a standardised format for her collections but not for her novels suggests that the novels are functioning on their individual internal needs, each taking the format most suited to the text as a cohesive whole. In comparison, the stories are collated to satisfy book-length publication

requirements: for convenience rather than through a desire to impose a monotextual reading experience.

As discussed at the end of Chapter two, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and Kate Atkinson's *One Good Turn* make repeated, explicit references to the structuring devices and their metaphorical equivalents in the text. Alex Garland's *The Tesseract* (1998) also uses diegetic references to inform structuring techniques with comments within the text such as:

Take six cubes and arrange them into the shape of a crucifix. Take two more cubes and stick them either side of the crucifix, at the point where the cross is made. Now you have a tesseract. A tesseract is a three-dimensional object. A tesseract is also a four-dimensional object – a hypercube – un-ravelled.<sup>174</sup>

An author's note is also included at the end of the book, noting that:

Some definitions of a tesseract describe it as a hypercube unravelled, and others define it as the hypercube itself. I chose the version used here only because I happened to prefer it. Similar liberties have been taken with everything presented as fact in this novel.<sup>175</sup>

The author's note takes the function of a preface through this retrospective explanation of how the book is to be read, and therefore how it is to be understood. As in *Cloud Atlas*, the structuring device of *The Tesseract* impacts heavily on the reader's comprehension of the links between the sections and the sense of narrative drive. Garland uses graphics as a sectioning device: the image of a running black dog on the section title pages for the first three – '1-1', '2-1', and '3-2':

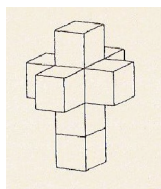
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<sup>174</sup>Alex Garland, *The Tesseract*, (New York: Viking, 1998; repr. London: Penguin, 1999), pp. 307-308.

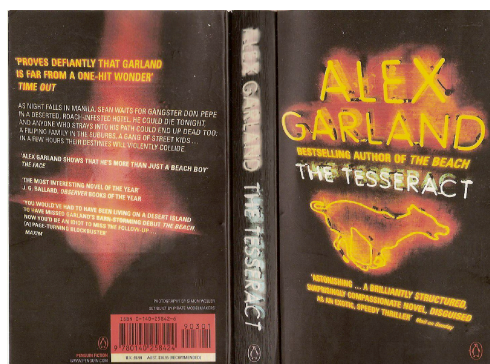
<sup>175</sup>Garland, p. 337.



and an image of the hypercube on the fourth and final section title page – ‘4-3.’:



The silhouette of the running dog is also used in the cover design, enhancing the sense of continuity created by the internal repetition:



When this internal graphic repetition is broken by the final graphic of the hypercube, the reader is subconsciously prepared for this being the final section: as in Atkinson’s more polytextual work, it is the final section which brings the different narrative strands into the same diegesis and ends the book on a note of monotextual unity. Like *One Good Turn*, *The Tesseract* also lacks an index or a table of contents, but uses both autonomously titled and numerical intertitles throughout the text.

By hanging the structure of a book around a central conceit – such as the tesseract in *The Tesseract* – the reader’s expectations are easily shaped and contained: through this

direct pattern recognition they know what information to expect and receive for the story to continue and learn to accept what may remain hidden. For example, *One Day* (2009) by David Nichols charts the events of 15<sup>th</sup> July between 1988 and 2008, following the relationship between the two protagonists – Emma and Dexter – and the development of that relationship over time, in accordance with their changing circumstances and desires. The central structural conceit of the day of the year is used to explore the reverse-mirror of Emma and Dexter’s personalities and pace of development. The intertitles are used to remind and reinforce the central conceit of the date, and the reader learns that while the actions of each 15<sup>th</sup> July will give a certain number of clues as to the activities of Emma and Dexter over the intervening year, they will not play the role of an annual summary. Shifts and changes are left unexplained, as one grows to expect from a narrative which dips in and out of the characters’ lives along pre-arranged boundaries. Where a book is reliant on a contextualised chronology – as in *One Day* – it makes it less likely that the sections have a strongly separate arc of unity from the book as a whole. The chronological element can be used by the reader to chart the progression and development of the story through the narrative and to draw out connections and comparisons, diluting the individuality of the sections in a managed, coordinated and – above all – expected fashion. Rather than connecting information being heightened through repetition, it is the information left unsaid – through the clear assumption of a linear reading and carrying of information from one part to another – which keeps the reader interested: any diversions from the expected layout are received by the reader with a heightened sensitivity.



While intertitles can be used as chronological and geographical markers to emphasise the monotextuality of a book – as in *Ghostwritten* and *One Day* – they can also be used to emphasise the polytextuality by clearly separating one line of narrative from another, especially when the narratives overlap or are spliced together. While the characters, settings and individual plot-arcs in Sarah Hall's *How to Paint a Dead Man* reoccur and flit between the intercut sections, the titles clearly posit the changing narrator, chronology and focus of each section. More obdurately, the titles of the five stories which comprise Kazuo Ishiguro's *Nocturnes* do not share a determining, connecting titular theme and thereby place a focus on the polytextual nature of the book. While the five sections in *Nocturnes* share diegetic elements through connecting characters, this is not used as a central connecting principle. Likewise, in Kate Atkinson's one book marketed as a short story collection – *Not the End of the World* (2002) – there are thematic links and connecting characters but these do not impact on the reader at the expense of the book's polytextuality.

The intratextual links can not only create an arc of unity for the book, but the search for these connections can replace the plot itself. In this way apparently polytextual books become monotextual since the movement between sections dilutes the autonomy of the individual fictions, as seen in the analysis of Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* in Chapter two. Similarly, in *number9dream* Mitchell uses polytextual elements to call into question the nature of reality itself through the breaks and shifts from one section to another. The sections are continually interrupted by dream narratives which lull the reader into a state of willing disbelief. The extraordinary events of the main narrative where, amongst other

things, the young male narrator Eiji Miyake is repeatedly kidnapped by the Japanese mafia, seem to be yet another dream sequence, but it is one which is never broken out of. By using the expectation that this is another day-dream to cushion the acceptance of the unfolding of extraordinary events and coincidences, Mitchell subverts the anticipation of disappointment. There is an expectation that the narrative will be cut short and left unconcluded: a structural equivalent of ‘the boy who cried wolf.’ This makes the eventual rounding off of the narrative even more satisfactory. In this manner, Mitchell plays with the expectations of a long and a short text. The reader is encouraged to continually re-question their investment in the alternative fictional reality of the book as a novel, since that reality itself is being thrown into question. Furthermore, the reader is repeatedly taken back to new beginnings, and conclusions are withheld to create suspense and a demand for satisfaction.

While Ali Smith chose not to use intertitles as a dividing technique in *The Accidental*, she still used the new page visually associated with a new chapter – including the white space at the top of the page where the intertitles would usually be positioned – to indicate division between sections, thereby moving slightly down the scale from monotext to polytext. An extreme example of monotextuality can be found in Richard Milward’s *Ten Storey Love Song* (2009), which contains no divisions, titled or otherwise: the text is not even broken into paragraphs. This visual flooding of the page has a very intense effect on the reader: one which the book’s minimal paratext attempts to make clear. In the novel’s blurb, *Ten Storey Love Song* is self-described as ‘one dynamite

paragraph’ and ‘a ferocious slab of concrete prose.’<sup>176</sup> The flowing, one-paragraph structure mimics the incoherent intoxication of the characters, the meandering between their different points of view, and the uniform concrete of the titular building which both houses and imprisons them. This refusal to divide the novel into smaller chunks is a refusal to allow space to mentally breathe, pause to consider or reflect on the depicted action, thus bringing the reader into closer proximity with the alcohol and drug fuelled confusion of the protagonists. With *Ten Storey Love Song* at one end of the sliding scale, the other polarity can be seen in the extreme visual disruption resulting from the fragmentation of narrative in Sarah Emily Miano’s *Encyclopaedia of Snow* (2003). This textual disintegration would appear to be inherent in Miano’s approach to writing since despite the subtitle of her most recent book – *Van Rijn: A Novel* (2006) – a brief glance at the complex structure of intertitles instantly suggests a more polytextual reading experience than is traditionally associated with a novel.

### **Getting seri(es)ous**

As discussed in the previous chapter, a collection of stories without the ‘and other stories’ appendage to the title will usually be named after a major factor of unity between the stories, for example a geographic location or recurring motif. This device not only nudges the reader in the direction of considering the links between the stories, but it is also a statement of unity: the implication is that the title refers to the effect created by the

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<sup>176</sup>Richard Milward, *Ten Storey Love Song* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. i.

combination of the individual stories in one book. *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* (1991) by Will Self is a good example of this. Although each of the six stories have unlinked individual titles, the title given to the book indicates the recurring theme which links their fictional realities. It is this shared fictional reality (which is gradually built up throughout the book by recurring minor details in each of the stories) which makes the book a short story cycle. Although each story works as a self-contained unit, the whole is more than the sum of the parts: the fictional reality of the book stands apart from the fictional realities of the individual stories. It is the fictional reality of the book and the methods which reinforce it which links the short story cycle with the fictional reality of the novel, just as it is the fictional realities of the individual stories and the methods they use to reinforce their autonomy which links the short story cycle with the short story collection. By choosing a title which underlines the fictional reality of the book as a unified whole, the book implicitly tips the balance towards the monotext end of the sliding scale in terms of creating reader expectations. Likewise, Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* and *Cloud Atlas* use their titles to reinforce their unity, despite being arguably closer to short story collections than novels in the effect of their contents. In both of these books by Mitchell the title provides a hint towards the organising principles of the books: the former's ghostly historical trails and traits and the latter's compilatory structure.

Self's *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* has an epigraph before the first fiction which is in fact a fake quote from the fictional world of another of the fictions in the collection. This sows seeds of doubt as to the fictional status of the ur-bororo tribe by putting one of their 'sayings' in a position associated with culture external to the text: a

link from the diegesis of the reader to the diegesis of the text. This opens a shared diegesis between the stories before we have begun to read them. Nicole Ward Jouve sees the fine balance between linking the stories and still keeping them separate as adding an extra layer of interest to a collection of short fiction, saying that ‘the collections of short stories I most admire are those which make up an organic whole, establish correspondences, some secret and some visible, between the stories that make up the volume. And yet they do not totalise.’<sup>177</sup> Self’s creation of an arc of unity for his collections, however, is not limited to the contents of one book. Each of his fictional works to date shares some reference to this alternative diegesis to which he repeatedly returns. Intratextual links become unfettered by bindings, and move between volumes. As Alex W. Friedman has noted when looking at multi-volume works, ‘The whole becomes the sum not only of the parts but also of something more: the interconnectedness between and through the parts that sweeps us back as well as forward as we move through the several volumes.’<sup>178</sup> This is explicit when we are reading a sequel, part of a trilogy, or part of a series: the paratext of the book firmly contextualises it in relation to the other works, and the marketing strategy often relies heavily on the reader’s foreknowledge of the protagonist or setting, as seen in Kate Atkinson’s Jackson series. This can be read as an extension of thematic genre labels: the reader knows what to expect from a crime novel or a romance, in the same way they know what to expect from a series. In the case of Self’s prose fiction, the intratextual links between the books are as subtle as they are in

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<sup>177</sup>Nicole Ward Jouve, p. 40.

<sup>178</sup>Alex W. Friedman, ‘The Modern Multivalent Novel: Form and Function’, *The Theory of the Novel: New Essays*, ed. John Halperin, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 121-140, (p. 122).

his polytextual writing. The books are not marketed as ‘the next Zack Busner novel’, nor does the reader need to have read his work in any specific order for it to make sense. Rather than one book being a sequel to another, they are all set in loosely the same diegesis; although the diegesis itself is often warped and extended through drug abuse, mental illness and paranormal experiences. Just as a polytextual short fiction collection could be said to have no natural ending, this form of series is similarly extendable since its arc of unity does not form a separate plot device. As Bahktin notes, ‘the adventures themselves are strung together in an extra temporal and in effect infinite series: this series can be extended as long as likes; in itself it has no necessary internal limits.’<sup>179</sup>

The presentation of texts as one book bears heavily on our reading of the work. In *Paratexts*, Genette discusses this in relation to the differently bound editions of Proust which have been made available to readers at varying points since first publication, concluding that:

[T]he fact remains that since 1913 two or three generations of readers will have had different perceptions of Proust’s work and accordingly will doubtless have read it differently, depending on whether they were receiving it as a set of autonomous works or as a unitary whole, with a single title, in three volumes.<sup>180</sup>

As mentioned briefly in Chapter three, the epitext of a book may include a film or computer game version of the narrative. The effect of adaptation is similar to that of a series – however loosely one determines series, as discussed – through an extension of diegesis. The effect of extending diegesis is to create a new sliding scale: rather than the polytext/monotext sliding scale posited by this thesis in relation to the printed, bound

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<sup>179</sup>Bakhtin, ‘Forms of Time’, p. 94.

<sup>180</sup>Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 63.

book, this new scale is one of fictionality. The sliding scale of fictionality could draw on the concept of the polytext/monotext scale, but extends it beyond the boundaries of the printed text and into the level of diegetic connection: how widely are a text's boundaries drawn by its connection to fictions by other authors, to reinterpretations of real geographic settings or historical figures. The effect of a series in printed, bound books is separate from this fictional scale since although '[t]he *sequel*, as we have seen, differs from a continuation in that it continues a work not in order to bring it to a close but, on the contrary, in order to take it beyond what was initially considered to be its ending', it still contains a natural sense of closure: once the final page is turned, we end the diegetic involvement.<sup>181</sup>

The open resonance of association caused by the juxtaposition of individual texts can bring one text to question the fictionality of the others. When frame narratives are used, this often leads to one of the diegesis becoming more 'privileged' than the others since it purports to be less fictional in comparison: covertly rather than overtly fictionalised. This leads to the intrasectional relationships being strengthened, enhancing the monotextuality of the book as already seen in Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* and Atkinson's *Emotionally Weird*. In *Music, in a Foreign Language* (1994) by Andrew Crumey, the collection of Galli stories referenced continually in the text mock, mimic and expand upon the structure of the questions of probability, possibility and composition raised by both the content and the structure of the text itself – for example, '[y]ou realise that you have started reading another story in the collection, which only begins in the same

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<sup>181</sup>Genette, *Palimpsests*, p. 206. Italics in original.

manner as the first, but then strikes off in a wholly different direction. What a curious idea!’<sup>182</sup> This is typical of Crumey’s work, where the self-referentiality of the text is used to both reinforce and question its fictional nature and structure. For example, in *Mr Mee* (2000) there are three main narrative strands – Mr Mee, Ferrand and Minard, and Dr Petrie. Although characters such as Donald Macintyre and Louise the student cross the diegetic boundaries between the three strands, their fictionality is enforced through discoveries in the other diegeses, such as Dr Petrie’s academic work on Ferrand and Minard leading him to believe that ‘Ferrand and Minard never lived. They are creatures of fiction, invented by Rousseau.’<sup>183</sup> Having previously been led to question how the Ferrand and Menard sections linked with Dr Petrie’s academic work on the pair, the reader is then led to believe that they are reading the account Dr Petrie has found on the internet, but this is never explicitly proven. The diegeses are left open, able to drift from book to book as the character Pfitz does – becoming an embodiment of the main question that all of Crumey’s work seems to posit: are things ordained or accidents and can one do anything about it either way? In *Mr Mee*, Crumey introduces a fourth narrative strand as an epilogue, pulling the separate sections together and retrospectively justifying the presentation of the overall story as one, not many. This is similar to the tendency previously noted in Atkinson’s work for narrative strands to pull together roughly three quarters of the way through each of her texts, working towards a unifying conclusion.

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<sup>182</sup> Andrew Crumey, *Music, In a Foreign Language* (Sawtry: Dedalus, 1994; repr. 2004), p. 216.

<sup>183</sup> Andrew Crumey, *Mr Mee* (London: Picador, 2000; repr, 2001), p. 287.



In much the same way as Will Self's work forms a loose series through shared, extended diegeses between books, Crumey's work keeps the different diegetic levels open between works, but uses them to question the veracity of experience in preceding books. Where Self does similarly – for example, the cross-referencing of mental illness and believed experience which occurs within *The Book of Dave*, and which is spread across his *oeuvre* through the character Simon Dykes in *Great Apes* (2007), *Dr Mukti and Other Tales of Woe* (1998), *Grey Area and Other Stories* (1994) and *How the Dead Live* (2001) – he does so from the secure point of a main diegesis which is repeatedly returned to and thus enforced. Whether within the same book – as in *The Book of Dave* – or in subsequent or preceding books – as with Simon Dykes – the alternative diegetic levels are explicitly fictionalised as resulting from drug abuse or mental illness. When the character either recovers or an outside perspective is presented through another character – often a member of the medical profession, such as the recurring figure of Dr Busner – then the privileged stance of the main, shared diegesis is secured as an intratextual link. In comparison, Crumey undermines rather than reinforces any concept of one shared, privileged main diegesis linking his books: the linking diegeses is likely to be the most fictionalised one. For example, in *Mobius Dick* (2004) comments such as, '[I]t's easy to establish links between things. The hard part is deciding what's genuinely connected' and the viewpoint, 'that coincidences aren't worth a damn unless you seize and make use of them' can be used to summarise the value of these links: since each book can be read separately from the others, the links between them may be interesting but do not impact on interpretation. This highlights a key difference between a monotext and a polytext

since in the former the links between diegetic levels are crucial to the overall arc of unity and the enjoyment of the text. In the latter, the links are secondary to the autonomy of the individual section. Approaching a body of work as a series, the scale is directly applicable: if a subsequent work depends so strongly on a previous work that it cannot function without it, then it is linked with the preceding work in much the same way as two sections in a monotext. If the connections between the texts do not impact on the understanding and appreciation of them as individual pieces then they function as a polytext.

### **Separation anxiety**

A classic conceit around which to structure a text is the use of pre-existing forms to divide the narrative into accessible sections and clearly signify changes in narrator, geography and time-elapses. Perhaps the most widely used and theorised example of this is the epistolary novel which Tynyanov identifies as being born out of the reader's familiarity with reading between the lines in this form since, '[l]etters turned out to be the handiest, the easiest, the most needed phenomenon, and here the new principles of construction were displayed with unusual emphasis: leaving things unsaid, being fragmentary, hinting.'<sup>184</sup> The reader's expectations of a letter are primarily formed by the paratext associated with the form itself: if addressee, signatory, time, date and location are missing then this can often be seen as a mute element of the plot: the anonymous

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<sup>184</sup>Tynyanov, p. 41.

threatening letters in Barnes' *Arthur & George*, the broken-off explanations in the 'Letters from Zedeghelm' in Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. When Bakhtin refers to 'the novel's special relationship with extraliterary genres' he brings out the importance of context of presentation.<sup>185</sup> Letters are often seen as prompts to respond: the plot lies in the correspondence, not in the single piece. There is an expectation that questions will be raised and answered. Separated from its context, the fictional letter is difficult to differentiate from a non-fictional letter: the form is transformed by the fictionality of its setting.

Fictional diary entries are equally dependent upon this context of presentation, although Natascha Würzbach separates the former from the latter since 'the diary is a soliloquy and the letter is something of a dialogue.'<sup>186</sup> Since diaries are usually private, the reader is automatically drawn into an awareness of the subjectivity of the diary's author: there is no automatic questioning of the veracity of its contents since no alternative view is presented. Both diaries and letters contain a natural sense of imperative – something has driven their author to write – and a natural use of paratext encoded within form. They also set a natural momentum for the narrative which a switching between forms – such as the use of email, memo, diary and letter in Paul Torday's *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen* – can subvert the pace for greater narrative impetus. While the paratexts associated with these extra-literary forms – such as the diary and the letter – are instantly recognisable to the reader, their effect within the book varies

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<sup>185</sup>Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', p. 33.

<sup>186</sup>Natascha Würzbach, *The Novel in Letters: Epistolary Fiction in the Early English Novel, 1678-1740* (London: Routledge, 1969), p. xxi.

hugely from text to text depending on whether they are assimilated within the narrative, as in *Arthur and George* or form the narrative, as in *Salmon Fishing*. When extra-artistic forms are incorporated – such as the sections of critical writing in *Mobius Dick* – then they become closer to pastiche, taking the place of a thematic rather than structural genre.

This combination of extra-literary and extra-artistic forms within fictional narratives alters their purpose from transmission to representation. As Bakhtin notes, '[a] parody may represent and ridicule these distinctive features of the sonnet well or badly, profoundly or superficially. But in any case, what results is not a sonnet, but rather the *image of a sonnet*.'<sup>187</sup> This continual internal assimilation of familiar external forms pushes a text closer to monotextuality than polytextuality; the book as a cohesive whole must impact strongly enough on the reader to prevent the fragmentation of presentation from leading to a fragmentation of understanding. Read as separate pieces, the impact of the device – the letter, the diary entry, the sonnet – is lost because the context of its fictionality and therefore its purpose within a larger work is lost. The paratext of these devices works on a different level to the traditional peritext of a book: it forms an integral part of the text itself, rather than an ephemeral addition. This is similar to the role of the main title, as discussed previously. The concept of paratext itself is parodied and fictionalised: assimilated within the text. In reference to the inclusion of extra-literary and extra-artistic devices within works of prose fiction, Bakhtin notes that 'such incorporated genres usually preserve within the novel their own structural integrity and independence,

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<sup>187</sup>Bakhtin, 'From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse', *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays By M.M. Bakhtin* trans. Michael Holquist, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), pp. 41-83, (p. 51). Italics in original.

as well as their own linguistic and stylistic peculiarities.’<sup>188</sup> Since printed, bound prose fiction has incorporated these parodies of paratext since its inception, the relationship between the text and its paratext is clearly an important one; it is this relationship which will potentially be lost – in the form we currently recognise – as our concept of the book is affected by the move from print to digital. The incorporation and parody of digital forms – the text message, the email, the blog, the website, the Facebook status update, the tweet – has already become an accepted factor in printed fiction: the relationship between the transmission and representation for digital fiction is still to be explored.

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<sup>188</sup>‘Discourse in the Novel’, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays By M.M. Bakhtin*, trans. Michael Holquist, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), pp. 259-422, (p. 321).

## Conclusion

If we pictured the panorama of short story cycles as a spectrum, the limit of one extreme of the spectrum would be the “mere” collection of unconnected stories, while the limit of the other extreme would be the novel.

Forrest L. Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century*

In hybrid fiction there are no hard and fast rules on how the text should be structured: every work of fiction – wherever it falls on the scale between monotext and polytext – ought to respond to its own internal demands for cohesion, connection and reflexivity. Responding to external demands on format and content can reduce the literary quality of the text being written, since the structure and the content should be in synchronicity with each other rather than with ‘what’s hot’ in the publishing industry if it is to stand alone as a cultural artefact as well as an engaging read. As Smith points out:

A commercial writer has to have that eye on the ball for what’s happening, what’s selling, what trends are out there. For a literary writer it’s quite different because you’ve got to write what you want to write: it has to be readable and all the rest of it – and good – but there’s no point in trying to hook on to a trend which is going to be over by the time you’ve finished your book.<sup>189</sup>

In a perfect world perhaps literary texts would be considered without commercial implications and judged on their individual merits: received, appreciated or condemned from a neutral platform. The genre labels ‘short fiction’ and ‘novel’ would relate only to structure, not to value. However, by the time we read the first word – of a piece of short fiction or a novel – we’ve already made a variety of value judgements which prejudice us

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<sup>189</sup>Smith, ‘Interview 1 – Jane Smith’, Appendix B.

against a ‘clean’ reading of the text itself. The labels ‘short fiction’ and ‘novel’ carry connotations far beyond their designation of a structural template.

A recent review of Daniel Kehlmann’s *Fame* (2010) in *The Observer* suggests that the Save Our Short Story campaign and associated attempts to revitalise public awareness and appreciation of the short story are bearing fruit: the reviewer – Edmund Gordon – attacks the book’s subtitle ‘novel in nine episodes’ for being misleading since the book ‘comprises nine entirely self-sufficient stories, obeying different narrative laws’ and criticises Kehlmann since ‘his willingness to package his work in a way that makes it more marketable (and a writer with so many sales behind him must have had some say in the matter) suggests a level of collusion with that bitch villain of his new book, *Publicity*; and this somewhat undermines the urgency of the stories themselves.’<sup>190</sup> However, as Hershman has commented, ‘[u]ntil publishers are shoving novelists aside in their dash towards the next hot short story author, I won’t believe talk of changes – in this sphere.’<sup>191</sup> The negative connotations of structural genre labels can discourage writers from attempting diverse forms of writing and pushing structural boundaries into new sphere if they do not perceive a financial benefit or a platform for reaching an audience. In straitened financial times, it is important that writers keep producing work for the love of it, not the price tag, but also that audiences are able to receive work from a variety of voices to keep up interest in reading. As Jane Smith notes, ‘it’s really hard for authors – if they’re not getting feedback, if they’re not getting their work validated by publication –

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<sup>190</sup>Edmund Gordon, ‘Fame by Daniel Kehlmann’, *Observer*, 19 September 2010, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/sep/19/daniel-kehlmann-fame>>, [accessed 26 January 2011].

<sup>191</sup>Hershman, ‘Interview 4 – Tania Hershman’, Appendix B.

to just be sitting and writing for various competitions in the hope that perhaps they're going to be placed.'<sup>192</sup>

This struggle between the commercial and literary value of fiction is not without precedent. Likewise, the desire to collate shorter pieces into longer narratives is a historical tradition rather than a startling new trend: in *The Short Story* (1977), Ian Reid points out that 'many old story-clusters show that the impulse goes far back into oral tradition, while conventions of the written word have introduced also a practical need to mediate between normal short story size and normal book size.'<sup>193</sup> Clearly, these hybrid works have been around since the invention of the printing press. By collating current industry trends and practices alongside theoretical work on contemporary forms, this thesis has suggested routes for the future as writers, publishing houses, manufacturers and retailers turn their attention to the uncertain role of the printed book in the digital age. With the changing opportunities involved in digital production and presentation, our reception of terms such as 'short story' and 'novel' may also change: writer and short story theorist Ailsa Cox sees the impact of digital publishing as having bringing the situation 'to a point when generic boundaries cease to matter so much.'<sup>194</sup> In her analysis of the impact of marketing on contemporary British literature, Squires notes that '[t]he impact of genre evolution on writers' decisions might therefore be the most meaningful textual interpretation of genre in the marketplace, whilst reinterpretations necessarily render texts subject to marketing and the vagaries of material and contextual

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<sup>192</sup>Smith, 'Interview 1 – Jane Smith', Appendix B.

<sup>193</sup>Reid, *The Short Story* (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 46.

<sup>194</sup>Cox, 'Interview 2 – Dr Ailsa Cox', Appendix B.



representation.<sup>195</sup> The opportunities being raised by digital publishing techniques – for new methods of both receiving and delivering text to both old and new audiences – will massively impact upon the market for fiction. Whether this has a positive or a negative impact on the diversity and quality of Britain’s literary culture is still to be seen. Epitext is flourishing in the digital age thanks to social networking bringing immediate, cheap and user-friendly links to global audiences. The question of how digital peritext will function in creating and guiding reader expectation for fiction of all shapes and sizes remains uncertain until the technology for delivering texts digitally is resolved and the boundaries of possibility can begin to be tested and subverted, as has been the case with printed books since Gutenberg.

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<sup>195</sup>Squires, p. 85.

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# Part two

**'It is doubtless not a bad thing for a text to have to satisfy two criteria of literariness at once, that of fictional content and that of poetic form.'**

Gérard Genette, *Fiction and Diction*

**Steal**

**This**

**Book**

## **Table of Contents**

Induction

1. Dr Leah Beaufort Steps Out

2. Jacob's Other Stories

3. Erica Writes Her Wrongs

Epitaph



# Induction

When an old man dies a library burns down.

**African proverb**

## (i)

*The sound of trains still reminds me of my childhood and travelling to school; I used to fall asleep every day on the way home, listening to the lullaby of the tracks. That was when I lived with my family in my family house and I was only very young. I fell asleep then because the day had been so long and full of new, important things that I could not wait to dream of them. Also, sleeping made the next day come faster and the cycle would start all over again and there would be more, more, always wanting to see more.*

It was stuffy with the windows closed and the heat of so many bodies packed in. I put my wallet into my jacket pocket so that I could sit more comfortably and put my jacket over my lap. I took out my book but I do not remember reading a single word from it, just the lullaby rocking of the carriage and the relief of sitting.

When I woke up I had forgotten that I was on a train and it was not pleasant. There was a boy beside me listening to music in headphones and I could hear it scratching out and his arm was up drumming on the window and blocking my view. Across the way were the wee bairns who made a lot of noise and fought at each other so that they were always shooing and twisting in their seats, begging for some attention. I woke up and thought I was in the wrong place and then when I remembered – that I had taken a seat on this train to come home again – I did not feel happy. I had a great desire for the lavatory; this is usual for me after sleeping. On the coach I never slept unless I knew when there would be a stop.

The train lavatory rocked and rattled and smelt of waste. It could have been worse. On the way back I checked my suitcase was still safe in the rack. I stroked the brass fittings; such a handsome case. Spanish leather. Good solid workmanship. I'd had it for years; it was an engagement present from one of my wife's relatives. Originally it was part of a set of three. Back in the seat next to mine, that boy was reading a vividly coloured magazine. The cover was the same red as my suitcase. 'That is the same colour as my suitcase,' I said to him. He did not look up. 'My suitcase is red like your magazine,' I repeated and I rapped his magazine so he knew what it was that I was talking about.

'Eh?'

'I have a red suitcase.'

'Wassat?'

'I want to look out the window. Please be so good as to move your arm down.' He did not move his arm. I did not like him.

The bairns across the way were pulling at each others' hair; they both had grubby locks down to their shoulders and they were both exceptionally ill favoured. I decided that their parents must be in the seat in front of them, because no one else would put up with the back of their seat being pummelled so continuously without some form of admonishment. 'It is a long journey, and your bairns move a lot.'

They looked round, but they did not seem to see me.

I tried addressing the wee ones directly. 'Stop moving. You annoy me.'

They stopped still and looked at me. One of them was wearing a red jumper. I leant across to get a better look. 'I like your jumper.'

Then the parents were able to see me. The man put an arm out and pushed me back into my seat – not gently – and the woman said it was a shame and 'shouldn't be allowed.'

I completely agreed with her. The bairns started to pinch and writhe again and I opened my mouth to tell them to stop, but the man was watching me and not smiling and nothing came out of my mouth; his silence was sucking away my words, leaving me with no air in my chest.

It hurt, having no air in my chest. I tried to cough and I could not. Then the air came back all of a sudden and took me by surprise; the man huffed and turned back around away from looking at me. After that I sat still and concentrated on breathing for a while, listening to the towns pass by with the train announcements. Although I was not in the mood for reading yet, the edges of my book cut into my palms in a very pleasing way as I held it tightly.

The train was very hot. My bladder was pressing on my attention again. I followed nature's call along to the lavatory. It was occupied and I had to wait in the rickety hallway until a bone-thin lady emerged. She looked right through me. Perhaps I had annoyed her by knocking on the door and asking how long she would be, perhaps she did not want to be associated with matters of the digestive system. The lavatory did not smell as bad as the last time I had used it although perhaps I had simply adjusted to the indignity.

*This is where it all begins. This is the leaping point, the tipping point, the breaking point.*

*I was in the lavatory, so I neither saw the story start nor suspected that it might.*

I finished up my business and I did up my belt and I washed my hands as best as possible in the tiny sink. I did not want to fall over in the lavatory with the train pitching as it sang along, but I did not want to touch the walls to steady myself either. Then I came out, back out into the hallway, and found that there was a fat lady waiting to push past me, rude as anything, huffing her cheeks out and scowling as if I had been in there playing cards to pass the time, simply to spite her. I stood and looked out the window for a moment.

*I am sure it was not more than a moment. If I had gone back to my seat at that precise heartbeat of time, perhaps this story would not have started. Everything is a perhaps. Nothing is certain in this life except death and – who knows – maybe not even that.*

There was a man in my seat. Not a young man, not an old man. In his forties if I were forced to guess. He was sitting next to that boy with headphones on and black clothes and that glum way of looking out into nothing. He was sitting across from those scrabbling, mewling bairns. He was definitely sitting in my seat, holding my book half-open in his lap. ‘You are sitting in my seat,’ I said, keeping my voice low so as not to disturb anyone else.

He looked up at me in an interested way, and smiled. ‘Can I help you?’

‘That is my seat that you are sitting in.’

‘I’m afraid you must be mistaken. This is my seat.’

‘My seat.’ I echoed plaintively.

He shook his head slowly, put my book down on the fold-out table in front of him, reached out, took my hand and patted it gently.

I repeated myself.

He repeated his consolatory gesture.

‘Do you have your reservation?’ he asked.

I did not. I did not recall having made one. I also did not have my wallet. That is when I realised that he was wearing my jacket. I pointed this out and he frowned, let go of my hand and pulled the top of his chest back like an affronted pigeon. He put his hand down on top of my book and stroked it with his fingertips, as if it were a cat. The fat lady came huffing back along the aisle at this point, pushing to get past me.

Everybody joined in on the act then, telling me to sit down, telling me I was making a nuisance. Nobody wanted to know about the man taking my book and my seat and my jacket.

I sat in a spare table-seat further along the carriage, joining a silent Chinese family who looked at me as if I was about to eat them. I explained about my jacket, but they stayed silent. I do not think they can have understood my accent. I was completely awake and bunching in on myself with worry. The train was a metal monster and I was digesting in its stomach. I looked up the rows of seats and down back along the row again in case there had been a mistake but no.

I got up again and walked back along the shuddering aisle. That boy still looked out the window, those dirty bairns still mewled at each other. He still sat in my seat, flicking through the stained pages of my book.

‘Give me back my jacket or I will call the guard.’ The threat had no effect, even though I was speaking almost loudly.

He blinked at me; sighed, then turned back to perusing my book.

I changed tack, raising my voice further and speaking over him to that boy in the headphones. ‘Tell him. Tell him this is my seat. Tell him I have been sitting here, next to you.’

That boy looked at me, looked at him, then looked out the window with renewed glumness and a complete lack of interest in my predicament.

I turned to the father of those annoying bairns. ‘You remember me?’

It seemed he chose not to.

‘You spoke to me, less than an hour ago.’

Not willing to either acknowledge or repeat the experience, the father examined the back of the seat in front of him while the wee ones pressed their faces into the window, fighting over who got to smudge the clearest view with their nose.

*Had my wife been there she would have had her finger pushed into the interloper’s chest, she would have challenged him at the top of her voice and railed at the other passengers and then at the heavens until one of them answered her.*



Everyone in hearing distance was embarrassed for me. They expressed their sense of community by sitting with their hands folded on their lap, eye contact slipping off to one side and mouths pressed firmly shut. I joined them in wishing the problem would apologise quietly, go away politely and stay away respectfully.

I did not go away. I reached out my hand and I plucked at the sleeve of my very own jacket, needing to feel that it was substantial, that it was real. It felt rough and cool between my fingers and the blue veins on the back of my hands throbbed. I was asked to let go. The train was very hot. I was asked again and I realised that I was crying. The tears were shaming down my cheeks and I could hear a high, thin sound like a far kettle. It was me; keening as much as crying. The flush of embarrassment was spreading through the carriage and the hairs left on my body were prickling. Everything felt wrong from the fit of my skin to the way all those eyes were pretending not to look at me.

One more time, in a very small voice, 'please give me back my jacket.'

Him in my seat told me to go away.

Back at the table, the silence of the Chinese family was welcoming. I wiped my tears away on my shirt sleeve. Their wee bairn was sitting very still, very quiet. Applying great care and attention, he was colouring in a picture of a dinosaur with a red crayon. The train pulled into another station I did not catch the name of. It was hard to listen to the announcer with so many thoughts flying through my head and it was hard to keep from crying again. The background chatter grew back again and that is how I knew for certain that everyone had stopped talking and had been staring at me before. The train

was hot and I was almost glad not to have my jacket. It was made of wool, natural fibres being the best for keeping the heat in.

The dinosaur was a long necked one with a small head and ridges along its back. The wee Chinese bairn had done a very good job of colouring the ground beneath it green and the sky above it blue, although the tree off to one side was a very scruffy piece of work in brown. He was using a proper wax crayon and pushing down hard to make the red of the dinosaur's body as dense and rich a colour as could be achieved. I breathed in the classroom memories of the wax – each colour smelling the same – and watched the tip of the crayon flatten into the paper and felt I was forgetting something important.

From all the sniffing and the tears, my nose felt as badly as though I had a heavy cold. I reached into my jacket pocket for a handkerchief and my hand went down into the plastic ridge of the seat beside me. The Chinese lady shifted herself closer to the window to give me greater flailing room. No more jacket, no more handkerchief. But I was rich in memory and I had a home to go to. I must have had a home to go to, because I remember that I was going home. Home is where the heart is. Or where the hearth is. Burning love, either way. Warming, melting, helping love. Scalding, scolding, raking love. Red hot. Red. Red like the crayon. Red like my suitcase.

The train shuddered and stopped: we were at a station. I stood up and saw him wearing my jacket stand up like a puppet, connected to me with invisible strings. I put my hand up to point at him but another passenger filled my view then another one knocked me and another one stepped on my foot as they pulled their possessions down from the luggage rack.

Opening my mouth to bellow against the injustice, all that came out was a hot puff of air because through the window I saw him in my jacket slipping away in the crowd with a bright flash of red thumping along his side, clutched in his scheming, thieving, dirty hand.

There was no time to stop and mull. I joined in the pushing and the shoving and I made it off the train and onto the platform. Once there I saw the flash of red running round a corner and I ran after it.

Ahead of the crowd, I reached the ticket barrier and I lost him. The barrier would not give and I bruised my hip trying it.

‘Give us your ticket,’ said a man in uniform. ‘I’ll help you with that.’

I explained the man in front had taken my bag.

He asked for my ticket again.

The thief, he had it all, dignity included. It took begging to be let through. Waverley Station was full of people running. None of them had my red suitcase. I stood and wept.

When I had run out of tears I tried to go back to the train. From the wrong side of the barrier, I watched it leave. I went back to the main circle of the station and tried to find a him with my suitcase again: there was no luck there. But I did find a place called the Left Luggage. ‘My luggage has left,’ I said by way of explaining why I was troubling them. ‘In the possession of the wrong person.’

They laughed. One of them gave me a seat for a bit then walked me across to the Lost Luggage desk.

‘A man took my things and then he was cruel to me beyond human reason,’ I said.

The girl behind the desk sighed and tipped her head to one side. We were getting on uncommonly well. ‘Where was your train headed, yeah?’

‘Home,’ I replied, risking a wee smile. She straightened her head up.

‘I mean to say, right, what was the final destination? Sir?’

‘Home.’ I tried to say more about it, but the words did not match up to my thoughts.

She exhaled slowly, staring me down to silence. ‘Fill this out for me, and this blue one. Not there. Outside.’

I asked her for directions to the toilet and left the desk with a handful of coloured paper slips.

There was a cleaner and his things round the corner from the toilets, mopping up something pink. He told me it was milkshake.

We lamented the decline in modern manners.

He asked where I was headed to.

I admitted that there might be some uncertainty over that.

‘What town, chief?’

‘Just home.’

‘Nah, what station is that then?’

I could not say. There was a temporary dislike between us. I broke it by showing him my forms.

He asked if I could write.

Just right then I felt that perhaps I could not.

He leant his mop up against the tiles and said he would give me a head start.

‘Surname?’ he asked.

I shook my head.

‘First name? What do they call you?’

I looked at the pink puddle near my feet. It had smears in it.

‘You taking the piss, chief?’

I walked off. He tried to give me the forms back and I shook my fist at him and turned my shoulder.

Back at the Lost Luggage desk, the girl was on the telephone. I stood in front of her until she looked at me, balanced the phone under her chin and addressed me directly.

‘Hi, yeah. Have you finished filling out them forms, yeah?’

I held up my empty hands.

She spoke into the phone. ‘Got to go, yeah? Someone’s here.’ and hung up.

‘I want my suitcase, please. And my jacket. And my book. Everything else is in either the jacket or the suitcase. It should all still be in order. Please.’

She shook her head and gave a small shrug. ‘No red suitcases handed in, yeah? Got those forms?’

I explained that I had lost the forms.

She commented that I would probably forget my own name next.

I agreed that I had.

She asked if I thought I was being funny.

I shook my head.

With nothing more but another handful of forms and a sense of being unwelcome, I walked back towards the toilets. They had the same barriers as the train platform. They cost a scandalous thirty pence.

There was nothing in my pockets. I spotted the cleaner coming out of a cupboard and went to sit on a bench by the ticket machine with my back to him. The bench was cold through my trousers, and I thought that if I was at home, wherever my home was, I would probably be having a cup of tea and a piece of toast about now. I tried to picture the pattern on my china and could not think of anything except the bench I was sitting on. I tried to picture taking the bread out of wherever I kept it. Nothing came, no image of a fridge or a cupboard or a pantry. No key in the lock, no front door.

*Once upon a time there was a young man whose life was an unwritten book.*

There was a girl in front of a machine, buying a ticket. I approached her and smiled.

‘Please, young lady. Who am I?’ She grabbed at her change from the machine, dropping half of it on the floor. I bent over to help her pick it up – not particularly quickly with my knees the way they are – and she put her shoe over the coins nearest me.

I waved the forms at her, hoping she might help me find the answers. None of the questions on the forms made any sense. Then I saw the policeman watching me.

My memory might have been gone but my gut instincts never failed. I belched and knew that I needed the changing scenery of fresh air. I followed the signs for the way

out and there it was—a great grey ramp with taxis coming down and people walking up one wide pavement on the side. Edinburgh is all about the hills, that much I have always known. Hills and narrow passages; hidden turnings and countless steps. Such a pleasure to find a ramp, so much easier on the knees.

The coloured forms were as much use to me as pigeon feathers. I stepped along the grey ramp up into the outside world and let them fall out of my hands.

It was so cold; I lost hold of my breath and had to knock my chest with my fist and cough to keep breathing. It was almost dark; a half-lit greyness stretched across the sky above the city buildings. I had not expected such coldness. It struck me – for the first time – that without the protective layer of my jacket and nowhere to go I might die.

Stepping off the train had started a process where the world I knew peeled away, revealing a monstrous core. There I was, as good as naked, exposed to the elements. I tried to explain this to a man who walked up next to me.

He upped his pace and left me.

‘I’m naked,’ I said to two women walking arm in arm.

They looked me up and down then turned and went back the direction they had come from. I looked after them and saw that they had stopped to talk to some policemen in yellow jackets. It was rude of them not to talk me.

In trying to go back down into the station I ended up in a glass-lined shopping centre. It was brightly lit and the further I walked into it the warmer I got. The people around me walked slowly and smiled. Even still, as I walked past the brightly coloured

shop fronts it felt that the mannequins turned their heads to watch me whenever I looked away from them.

Having made a full track round the top layer of the shopping centre and found nowhere to sit down, I took a moving escalator and rode down to the next level. The shop mannequins whispered behind my back. I rode back up but it seemed even colder this time.

I walked round and rode down and walked round and rode down until I did not know which way was the sky and which way was the ground. After forever I reached the bottom and knew I had gone to heaven. There were seats all around me, and I could smell food. There was a free public toilet. There were so many people, talking and laughing and not looking at me.

*Once upon a time there was a young man whose life was an unwritten book. He was lonely in crowds.*

Soon I was sitting down on a table by myself and I could feel my heart settling in my chest. The seat was formed from smooth plastic and it was clean. I was cocooned in warmth. The colourful surface of the table was mostly hidden under discarded food wrappers. I ate the rest of the burger then put the empty carton in the rubbish bin. I did the same on the next table along, moving slowly. Nobody really watched me; away from the shop windows I was invisible.



*Once upon a time there was a young man whose life was an unwritten book. He was lonely in crowds. He hated being invisible.*

Eating only made me hungrier. I cleared all the tables in a guilty shuffle that took me deeper and deeper into the food court. The darkening glass of the automatic doors swooshed and shut, swooshed and shut as people went back out to the failing day.

The family at the table next to me started putting bairns in buggies and messing around with rucksacks. Their eldest stared straight at me, scowling.

I stuck my tongue out at him.

He put down his coke and stood up.

I looked at my knees. There was a stain on my trousers so I picked at it. When the family had gone I went and sat in the boy's seat. I took his mouthed straw out and drank his coke: the ice in it knocked against my teeth. Even in the heart of the place it was not as warm as I would have liked, without my jacket. The bubbles of the coke scraped at the inside of my throat. Perhaps I drank it too fast. Whatever desire had driven me out of my home in the first place was as lost as everything else.

The food court smelt of bread and frying with an edge of disinfectant. People seemed to be leaving at a rate and there were fewer uncleared tables to pick over. There was a likely couple not too far away; they were about my age and I was sure they would be able to point me in the right direction of a comfortable bed for the night.

Like me they were preparing to leave. The woman was taking their tray over to the bin, balancing her handbag in the crook of her arm and moving in small bird jerks. I

could not see any food left on the tray. I went across to their table slowly, trying to think of the right words to say. I had to move chairs out of my way and I started feeling scared for no reason at all.

*Once upon a time there was a young man whose life was an unwritten book. He was lonely in crowds. He hated being invisible. Then one day everything changed.*

Before I quite reached them, she fell over. There must have been some wrappings on the floor or a loose tile. Perhaps she did not have good balance. She wailed a little as she landed. Her man left fussing over their things and went straight to help her; he left their shopping bags so quickly that one fell over on its side. She was lucky to be looked out for like that. Other people came too and I found myself next to her, picking up her handbag from where she had dropped it and holding it out to her husband.

Her husband waved his hand towards the rest of their things. Perhaps he said something, told me to put it down. I am sure he thanked me. Everyone was round the woman in a circle, blocking out the white of her hair with their bodies. There was some talk of an ambulance and so forth but I was not worried; I expect she just broke her hip or bruised herself.

When you are old, you expect to die. They were older than I was. I remember that now. Old like I was, but older than I was.

I put the handbag down with the plastic bags of all the things they had been accumulating. The husband's coat was lying on the seat of a chair. I put down the

handbag and I picked the coat up. Thick wool, black. Proper lining. Afterwards I regretted that I had not kept hold of the handbag.

At the top of the escalator I steadied myself on the rail and put the coat on. Ducking my chin, I breathed in the ghost of pipe tobacco and aftershave.

*My aunt – I think my aunt but perhaps a grandmother or a family friend – smoked pipes. To sniff that scent is to be folded in her arms while the puppies play at her feet. She wears a man's hunting jacket and the wax on it leaves dark smears on my leg. We visit her every Mayday and I learn about the mechanics of breeding cattle and gorge on early blackberries. One year we stop going and she is never mentioned again and I only remember her through smelling other people.*

I kept going up and out I went the way I entered. Walking back through the upper levels of the shopping centre, all the shutters rattled down and blocked away the mannequins. All my memories were there until I tried to look directly at them: I could feel them inside me, floating. I shut my eyes and retraced my steps outside.

Had I not taken the coat then perhaps I would have been able to come back again, to the free warmth and other peoples' food. The story would have twisted in a different way and perhaps I would have been brought to a different ending. I have mixed feelings about that now. At that time I was outside in the fresh air and I was warm in a very smart coat and it felt acceptable.

The outside world was a carnival. The darkness was full, with stars up high being suggestive of frost later on. In front of me was a Ferris wheel of considerable size, flashing in patterns and colours. The trees were strung with small ice-blue lights, I had walked into a fairytale.

I lost myself in a town of small, overtly Teutonic wooden stalls with many free sample plates of Strudel and Stöllen. I put some in my coat pockets. I walked into this magical, open-air counterpart to the food court I had just left, where the air smelt of hot wine and apple-spices. Families and young couples fingered the candles and decorations on the stalls. Some of them ate Würste in buns. I stood and watched them.

Princes Street was as busy as if it were daytime. Out here the shop shutters stayed up. I looked at the entrance to Jenners and let my mind run away with itself.

*I am twenty again and buying gloves for my best girl. They cost a week's wage. She wants them in bright harlot red, made of the softest leather. She is next to me, laughing and trying on pair after pair. Her hands are so small – so exotic – that most of them just fall off. The gloves heap on the counter, mismatching pairs, and the assistants glare and we ignore them.*

I crossed the road and went in. The doors were heavy to push open but a stranger helped. He looked at my coat and he smiled and said something but I pushed right past him.

Everything was different; so busy. The ceiling was strung with baubles, and the counters were full of cosmetics. It was bright but softly so. It was warm. The floor was wet with all the customers coming in and out. I walked through to the back hall, and stared up.

I looked at the ridiculously large tree, filling the fine store with the scent and branches of a forest and I laughed.

‘It isn’t real,’ said a woman next to me. ‘They switched to artificial last year.’

I looked at her – raising my eyebrows – and she nodded as if very satisfied.

‘I’m looking for gloves,’ I said. ‘For my fiancée.’

She told me to try the basement. We stood next to each other and looked at the tree for a while.

It was truly a pleasure to stroll around the department store. It was not as I remembered it but I misplaced myself in the present and touched silk scarves, stroked fur and smelt all the perfumes in the Lady departments.

‘It is for my wife,’ I explained to each of the shop girls in turn. ‘It has to be very special.’

They told me about the bespoke gift wrap service which sounded very reasonably priced, considering they used real satin ribbons.

The furniture department was thankfully quiet. I found the most comfortable of the armchairs and had a wee nap. When I woke up my neck was stiff and I considered moving along to see if they also stocked mattresses. But there was a shop boy trying to help me most adamantly so I did not.

‘My son is in Silverware,’ I said, sitting up in the armchair and hoping to put off the inevitable. ‘He’ll be back to collect me in a moment.’ The shop boy left me alone. It was most restful there and I was touched by the dedication to customer care that I experienced; everyone who passed kept asking me if I was quite alright.

If it had not been for the security guard, I would have been quite content to stay all night.

Back out on the street, I waved at the security guard to show that while my shoulder was still sore, I forgave him the misunderstanding. In his position perhaps I would have reacted the same way. I have not always been economical with my fists myself. He pulled the shutters down then most of the lights went off. The other stores were doing the same and would not let me in either.

The Ferris Wheel cranked round and my neck felt cold. The sounds of the funfair began to leach of appeal. I walked just off Princes Street and into a bar and stood in a beer-damp corner. There was no loose change in the pockets of my new coat. Edging out the way of the groups of scarf-wrapped young people, I found a stool. To help myself warm back up I ate the cake samples from the German huts. There was a sticky patch left inside one pocket that would not scrape out.

It came slowly into my mind that the night before, in the Bed & Breakfast room without a television or even a radio, I had read five chapters of my book before falling asleep on top of the counterpane. Half the memory slipped in and out of my grasp like a fish. I could feel my fingers flicking through the book, smoothing down the pages with

the flat of my hand, picking at the curling cellophane cover. The name of the Bed & Breakfast flickered in the background and when I tried to focus on it then it swam away and was lost in the watery eddies swirling in my head. My book was nothing more than a half-forgotten dream but standing in the bar felt barely more real.

People in the booth behind me ordered food. Trying to ignore their chatter and fix on my memory, all I found were my losses. My suitcase gone, my jacket gone. Something that itched at me from inside my head.

‘Is there something here? Something just here on my scalp?’ I asked a nearby couple.

They looked at me, saw reassurance in the expensive cut and cloth of my coat and leant in. The girl shook her head, spilling her wine slightly.

‘Does it hurt?’ the man asked.

I told him it did not. I explained that it was itching.

They leant backwards. The man coughed something and they moved away.

‘Hop it. Go on, scram.’ The barman held a stack of glasses in one hand and a cloth in the other.

‘Where will I go?’

‘I’m putting these down then I’m calling the police.’

I stood up and turned towards the door. When I saw his body relax, I turned around and ran towards the door marked *Gents*.

It took three of them to lift me into the street. Once they let go then all the warmth of my anger stayed with me and gave my legs the strength to run again. There were buses

getting in my way and shouting all behind me but I ran on. Finally I was at the gates of Waverley Station and they were barricaded with bars as thick as my wrist. My arms were too tired to pull me up them: I hit them instead. There was no pain; the cold took it away. The cold took everything away. I was seeping out into the night, hanging in front of my mouth like my visible breath.

That night was not my finest. I found a stairwell, up on the hill that reaches the Royal Mile. There was too much tiredness in my bones to go any further. I huddled in my new coat and I put the newspaper underneath me and I waited for the night to pass.

Covered in a glittering frost, with the fairy lights of the trees in the distance and a stillness of no wind, it was breathtaking. I turned my collar up. Sleep happened, of a sort.

When the object hit me I did not know where I was. Wetness across my knees and the smell of beer told me it had been a can. The coat cushioned most of the blow. I felt every joint in my body as a small, dull pain and knew a new level of coldness.

The group was standing not so far away below me on the stairs, silhouetted in the half dark of the city. They jeered. They drew closer. They taunted me. Eventually they left. Shortly afterwards a lone figure came running back up; a man by the height of him.

I huddled, waiting.

He tossed a packet beside me. He left.

The chips were cold and half of them was gone from the polythene tray inside the wrappings. I almost missed the twenty pound note. It had ketchup on it. Perhaps I was



being paid for my entertainment or perhaps it was for their conscience. I licked it clean. I expect it was from the one who kicked my neck.

Dawn came with a greyness of heavy clouds that I knew in every aching tendon meant snow. My hands were mottled purple when I forced them up in front of my face; during my sleep they had slipped from my pockets. There was new frost on the chip wrappings on my lap. I rubbed the tears from my cheeks and found blood smeared round my ear. I took my time in standing up, then hit my chest to cough out the lumps in my throat.

Most pressing was my need to use some facilities. There was nobody around as I went against the step I had slept on. The indignity bit me along with the cold.

My ears rang as I went down to Waverley Station. The gates were unlocked, but I could not remember why I had cared so much. I walked down the ramp and sat on a bench, watching the cleaners pick the rubbish from between the racks with their long mechanical arms.

Once the concession stands began opening, I broke the twenty pound note for a cup of hot tea. The girl gave me a funny smile and a free bag of large biscuits. She asked me something but I could not hear her properly. The ringing had moved into a roaring, like water in a tunnel.

That night I found somewhere better to sleep. It was occupied but I persuaded that tramp to move. I wiped the blood off my shoes with one of the blankets he left behind and slept with his smell at the back of my throat.

**(ii)**

I do not wish to be able to smell myself when I move. Coming home now means shuffling halfway down these stone steps and hoping that nobody has moved my stash of paper, cardboard and blankets. Newcomers try – sometimes – but everyone else knows this is my patch.

I can remember every horrible detail of these days. Every cold, unfriendly detail of these nights. My memory runs in contrary patterns to my desires.

Today I followed a man with a black briefcase from North Bridge to South Bridge. He entered an office building and I stood outside, unable to remember why I was there. Eventually I walked up to the door of the building then turned and walked away. I wanted my suitcase, not his briefcase. My suitcase was red, not black. Probably.

The exact colour of my stolen suitcase has begun to trouble me. I am uncertain how bright the red really was. I wonder if I am mistaking red for purple. Purple for brown. Brown for blue. I cannot remember if I am colour blind and a half-echo of a conversation I once had makes me think that what I see as red is actually green. I stare at the Christmas trees still lining the shop windows, daring them to change colours like traffic lights.

Once the streets have emptied I am ready to change my clothes. Night-shopping in charity shop doorways is not without risks. The first time, I found a used nappy mixed in with the clothing and retched all over myself. The smell lingered on my hands and stopped me from eating for three days. Tonight I am luckier; I open the first black bag

carefully, trying not to rip the plastic. It is full of useless things for bairns. The next one is better. Dead people's clothes, now to be worn by a man who does not exist.

*I remember that I used to read; precious words which gave me places to go and things to believe in.*

It is too cold to change here in the open air. I take only what I need and re-tie the bag clumsily, my fingers thick and sore.

When I give up trying to sleep, the air is already turning dull grey under the fog. My fingers stump on the buttons and I drop one sock in a stagnant puddle. I put the thickest of the dirty clothes back on over the clean ones.

Walking is painful but necessary. I stamp life back into each foot. I can see the breath of the businessmen at the bus stop. They shuffle their feet and their papers as I get nearer. One of their suit jackets is shiny with wear and I want to stop and stroke it but I do not.

As the sun rises properly above the city the fog thins a little and the traffic thickens. I follow my usual route along to the station and the pavement glows in wet slicks that I try to avoid slipping on but it is not easy. The sun cutting through the sky blinds me. I stumble.

The hand that catches my arm is wearing red gloves with the fingers cut off. Such a waste of a decent pair of gloves.

‘Do you want a seat? I’ve a fold-out stashed back here.’ The man is young, wearing a red hat to match his gloves.

I start to cough.

He assembles an unlikely-looking stool and helps me onto it. ‘Isn’t it a braw morning? I love a mist rolling over the rooftops like this. God’s treat for those of us up early enough.’

I keep coughing.

He finds me a bottle of water. ‘Finish it, go on. Want something hot? I’ve two cups if you’re not in a rush.’

I admit, between coughs, that I have nowhere to rush to.

‘Then we’ll admire this mist together. Give me a sec.’

As the coughing fit dies down I shade my eyes with my hand and watch him duck behind a trestle table. I am just down from St. Giles. It must have been the cobbles nearly had me over. He produces a rug and places it over my knees then returns for a thermos and two mugs. I watch the steam rising from them as he pours and it mingles with his breath and it all mingles with the hanging fog.

Next to the thermos is a stack of chunky brown books, their titles embossed in gold. The man in the red hat screws the top back on the thermos then steps in front of the table and adjusts the hang of a cardboard sign. He lets go and steps back, leaving the sign to sway. Large black letters on a white background. I cannot fully make it out from this angle without falling off the stool. He stays there, admiring the table while the mugs cool in the morning air. ‘All my idea,’ he says. ‘One of my better ones, I think.’

I ask if it is tea or coffee in the mug, but he does not pass me one.

‘The diocese isn’t so keen. I’ve had to pay for these copies myself. It’s all about connecting with people.’

I cough again and he jumps to pat my back. Finally he brings the mug and places it in my hands and it burns in a way that makes me think it is freezing. I lower my face and smell it. Hot chocolate. The steam dampens my face and when I look up there is a flash of cold across my cheeks as though I have been crying. I would thank him but my chest is rattling and if I try to speak I will spill hot chocolate over myself.

While he talks, he stares at the rooftops. ‘It’s vital to get young people involved. You have to think the way they do. Facebook. Twitter. Going viral on YouTube. We’re having a flashmob on top of Arthur’s Seat once the students are back after Hogmanay.’

I drink my hot chocolate and nod, watching his red, fingerless gloves arc in the air, describing his thoughts as he speaks.

‘The campaign is sort of about reverse psychology. Making people think about the nature of sin. Getting the word out there about the good book. Making Jesus a meme, not a memo.’

The cardboard sign is still swaying. I finish the hot drink and stand up, clutching the rug to my chest.

‘I’m here most weekends. Drop by and say hi. Thanks for the chat.’ He takes the empty mug and gently prises the rug out of my hands. I stand in front of the table and read the cardboard sign. Large black letters on a white background: *Steal This Book*. He

takes one of the brown books from the pile and holds it out to me. 'They're free. For everyone. Go on.'

In the shop the man gives me two fifty-pence pieces and tells me to get out.

I pause before opening the door, reluctant to re-enter the cold fog.

'Got any more where this came from then?' he asks.

I shake my head.

'Pity. Better than the usual crap you bring in.'

I leave him turning the bible over in his hands and let the door bang shut with a muffled jangle behind me as I resume my daily walk to Waverley Station.

In the Lost Property Office, only one of the usual girls is in her allotted space behind the counter.

'Late today, Joe,' she says. It is the small one with the pronounced moustache. She has never asked me my name.

'My book please,' I say. 'My suitcase please. I am ready to collect them.'

She laughs – I do not know why – and continues tapping away at the computer.

I sit on the plastic bucket chair and wait.

The fat one with the particularly bad skin comes in with take-away coffee for them both and whispers in the small one's ear. They look over at me. The small one shrugs. The fat one puts down the coffee and waddles into the back office. She comes back with a stack of paperbacks, five or six of them at least. 'Which one?' she asks.

I come over and stroke the one on top. 'My suitcase?' I ask.

‘Don’t push it, Joe.’ She takes the top book off the stack and holds it out to me.

I do not take it. ‘I am not signing any forms.’

‘You never do. Which one do you want today?’

‘All of them?’

‘Sure. Whatever. See you later Joe.’

I spend the rest of the morning in the St. James Shopping Centre, out of the wind. I read slowly, savouring every word. Towards the end of the first book – *Dead Souls* by Nikolai Gogol – I am asked to move on. I finish *Dead Souls* in Burger King, place it at the bottom of my rucksack and start the next one, *A Perfect Spy* by John Le Carré.

I read all week, propped on steps and benches. I am lost in new worlds. When the chapter ends, I am hungry and cold. When the sun goes down I have to stop. At the weekend I take a different route to the station, one which does not pass by St. Giles. In my bag are three novels by Kitty Patterson and twelve Mills & Boons.

The next week, the short one at the Lost Property Office is not wearing make-up and her nose is red. She sneezes when I walk up to the counter.

‘Nothing for you today, Joe,’ she says. ‘I’m not in the mood.’

I finger the rock in my otherwise empty pocket. I am hungry. I stand and wait.

‘Fuck off, Joe. I’m not a library.’

I still have to be reminded of things before I can remember them for myself. Temples to the written word, I can remember libraries now.

The library is near my lair. Warm, comfortable and so long as I am quiet I can stay until closing time. Reading does not make me young again. There is pain in my wrists as I stroke the dust jackets in the early morning. My fingernails are yellow against the bleached paper pages. My hair is dirty white reflected in the polished tabletop.

The first shelf takes me a month to read. I skip some titles then panic and track back. Some days, the words swim and I cannot concentrate on them. Some days I cannot remember why I am there. The staff do not like to see me being upset; they ask me to be quiet and they ask me to leave; I have to hide in the Philosophy corner until I am presentable.

The library shuts when the streets start getting busy in the evenings. I cross the road outside a few times. I count the staff as they leave. When they are all gone I sneak back and check the doors.

One blustery day – when the clouds skid through the skies and the wind almost pushes me back down the steps – the library is very busy and the only free seat is next to a bairn. It roots in the wooden box of children's books, piling the most brightly coloured on the floor next to it. I wonder if it can read. When I lean down to ask I am made to leave the premises, forced back out into the half-hurricane. The next day I sit on the other side of the double doors with the other forgotten things and nobody bothers me while I read Andre Gide's *The Counterfeiters*.



According to the shiny badge pinned at eye-level on his waistcoat, it is Deputy Assistant Manager Nathaniel Drake who catches me shaving in the barely-adequate library facilities, early in the morning before the crowds push in. He says nothing and closes the door behind him when he leaves. I am reading extra-quietly in my corner – Terry Pratchett's *Going Postal* – when he comes over later on.

I pretend I cannot see him.

He goes away.

Two days later and I am sitting outside the sleeping library, waiting for time to pass and the doors to unlock. Deputy Assistant Manager Nathaniel Drake comes out and tells me to follow him.

I check the clock in the hallway as I follow him inside; there are still ten minutes before the library opens.

He leads me downstairs and unlocks the bathroom. 'Be quick. Clean up after yourself,' he says. 'Don't tell any of your tramp-mates. No washing once the library is open.'

It seems like a fair deal.

Where possible I try not to speak to people. It is easier when they come up with their own explanations.

My favourite place to read is the Fine Art Library. The shallow, wide, stone steps leading up to the top levels go straight up past stacked chairs to Reference. There are wooden desks and hard-backed chairs in Reference, all facing the same direction like an

examination hall. People stare blankly at their laptops. It is an odd silence and an uncomfortable one.

The route to Fine Art is half hidden through side doors which also take you to the administrative offices. When I first discovered these, my heart beat faster in my chest and I thought there would be another Lost Property office. There was not. I was escorted from the premises. Little doors lead to unknown places and when I pass them I press against them on the off chance that they will open and I will shuffle into familiarity.

At the back of the shelf aisles in Reference are more small doors leading to the old servant stairs. Staff scurry in and out with printed lists, stubby pencils, fading books – tattered old things without dust jackets – which they hand to potential readers as reluctantly as a child told to share their sweets.

When I am not reading I daydream that I will walk through one of these doors and find myself to be home. I begin to think that this is where home is. One day I will open a new book and it will be the book – my book – and a key will fall out from between the pages. The key will open one of the small doors and everything will be there and I will sleep forever without disruptions.

The sideways route to Fine Art ends in sunlight. I pull one of the chairs to a radiator under the dirty glass peaked roof and settle in. I bring books up from the main library and nobody stops me.

Sometimes the Fine Art staff move the DVD displays to give me more room. In a side room there is a small sink which I drink from rather than go down all those stairs to the bathroom. There is a dispenser of antibacterial gel. On the days I am not allowed to

wash in the bathroom I use it like an aftershave, slapped up the sides of my face not covered by my beard; it is cold and smells like hospitals.

For the rest of that winter I leave Fine Art when it falls dark, following the disc of the sun past the glass peaks and down the walls until I am back in the main library, huddled in the awkwardly placed but otherwise comfortable leather chairs. When the evenings lengthen I stay under the window of a roof until closing time. The library is a slow flower, raising its head to the sun and then dipping it again.

Edinburgh is built on tricks and lies. The three flights down from the library's main entrance should be leading into the bowels of the earth but the view from the stairwell windows suggests that I am descending from a great height rather than street level. The first time I walked into the library from the street and went down the stairs to find the toilets I had to clutch the banisters to stop from falling into myself with vertigo. It is a cheap conjuring trick. According to the windows once I am past the Special Collections, once I have waked down far enough for my knees to hurt – not woken up properly despite the walk up here from my lair – once I have reached the lowest level and the bathrooms my feet have not yet touched the ground.

The light is dim and hurtful and flickers outside the toilet doors. The cubicle lock clicks across but does not change colour on the outside. There are cracks in the porcelain. During the heavy spring rains it floods more than once, leading Deputy Assistant Manager Nathaniel Drake to curse and ask me if I have been 'fucking about with anything?'

The summer comes and goes. The leaves fall from the trees and make piles of mush in the corners of the paths across The Meadows; I shuffle past them on my early circuits, keeping my blood flowing in time with the tread of my feet. The nights get colder and longer. I cry openly on holidays when the library is closed and the streets are too full of blank-faced people.

The fairy lights go back up on the trees in Princes Street Gardens and the little wooden stalls re-appear. I know I have forgotten something but I cannot remember what. It gnaws at me.

Until I fall.

The ice on the steps is black in the dawn. My blood is black next to it. I lift my head and there is a dizziness like time passing. Then there are thoughts, like small knives in my head. I let my head back gently onto the step – into the still-wet stickiness – and breakfast on the memories before they leave me again.

*Shouting and throwing things at her and her shouting in her gibberish language and throwing them back at me. The book she is halfway through reading to our son, turning in the air and opening, hitting me awkwardly with the sharp corner of the heavy binding. Blood running into my eye. Our son standing in his crib, crying. Her pushing me away when I try to comfort him. Blood on the table.*

The memories are such thin, shivering little ghosts that I begin to wonder if that life actually existed at all or if it is something that I once read about.

Deputy Assistant Manager Nathaniel Drake is slow to open the library. I knock into him in my hurry to get in and wash down before the visitors to my book-palace arrive.

He grunts at me and scrabbles in his drawer for a long time before finally handing the toilet key over. 'Last day today. You can't keep doing this,' he says, apropos of nothing.

I stop my rush and wait for him to elaborate.

'We've had complaints from head-office.'

I wail.

'Shut up and make the most of it or I'll start the ban right now.'

I slop water everywhere and do not bother myself with wiping the sink down. I can see my own breath in the air of the room. The puddles are dark on the steel-grey tiles. I am counting under my breath but I do not know why. The old shirt goes in the bin and when I pull the new shirt on I find there is already a hole in the armpit.

Back in the library there is a woman in front of my shelf, picking books half out by their spines then pushing them back in half-heartedly, leaving them at awkward angles.

'My book,' I say. 'Move it.' If I reach past her for my book, for Herman Melville's *The Confidence Man*, then she will see the hole in my armpit. That would never do.

She does not get out of my way.

‘Need my book. Get out my way.’ There is a dizzy break of a heartbeat then I find that I am pulling all the books off the shelf. And the next shelf, and the next. I am throwing them at the floor. I am throwing handfuls of hardbacks at the woman who would not move and who is now crouched on her knees, sheltering her face with crossed forearms. I have made fists out of paperbacks and I am using them to batter the world away. I try to pull the heavy wooden shelves over, but they are bolted to the floor and there is no chance.

*Pale, hollow face like a skull. Big dark eyes. Dark hair tied back up on top of her head as it was when we first met. Our son in freshly pressed clothes, crying for the toys left in the bedroom; she slaps his bare legs until he is quiet, never letting go of his hand. Both cases – the smallest and the middle-sized one – are in the doorway. The taxi driver will carry them for her. She is talking but I cannot hear the words; they wash out of focus in a flood of denial.*

*Permanent Ban.* The words are heavy in my ears as I stand on the pavement outside my library.

‘I’m calling the other managers right now,’ repeats Deputy Assistant Manager Nathaniel Drake. ‘Don’t bother going up to Stockbridge either.’

‘My bag—’

He hustles me through the gates.

The cold air slaps me across the face and I am sitting on the chewing-gum decorated flagstones, blocking the flow of pedestrians. I shake my bruises down and walk up to the door. The library security guard stands there, arms crossed.

I whimper.

The security guard shakes his head. One of the librarians comes out with my coat and bag. I recognise her – this thin little snip of a girl with bad acne – from Fine Art.

‘This is not how the story ends,’ I explain. ‘Something beautiful is waiting to happen.’

She shakes her head. I keep talking but she does not want to understand, she is not waiting to hear me; she is stepping behind Security and vanishing.

At the Lost Property office, the two girls give me slanting looks. They do not greet me.

I stand by the counter and wait for them to bring me books.

They ignore me in favour of other people.

I wait until it is only me and the staff. ‘I am here for my books.’ I shut my eyes and remember the feel of sunshine on my face. When I open my eyes, there is no pile of books in front of me. ‘My books, please.’ I smile at the girls behind the counter, channelling the sunshine.

The two of them eye me and eye each other. Neither of them says anything.

My leg starts to jiggle and I can only stop it by putting my hand on my thigh.

‘You got your form?’ says the fat one.

This is obviously meant as some kind of a joke. I force a laugh and show them my empty hands.

‘You want to claim something, you got to fill out a form,’ says the short one.

‘You want me to call security?’ says the fat one. There is an empty doughnut bag on the table behind them, sugar on the short one’s cheek. Their walkie-talkies crackle. I can feel that crackle right behind my eyes.

Two Security men follow me from the Lost Property office over to the toilets. They wait outside, chatting to one of the attendants. My hands shakes under the hot-air dryer.

Coming back through the turnstile, they flank me and direct my steps to the exit, talking to each other over my head.

There are only three books left in my bag, one promising and two duff. Barely enough to keep me going for a week. The walk up the hill makes me cough. A woman pulls her child out of my way as I double over. For a moment I think I am going to fall, spiral down to my knees. Meet the pavement face-on. Then the cough draws me back with a jerk as though the brakes have been slammed on, hard. My head stays up and I stagger on.

My usual bench in The Meadows is empty. The Big Issue seller shakes his dreadlocks at me as I stumble past and I hurt my throat shouting hello. It feels good to be sitting down again. The weight off my feet also lifts something from my shoulders. With my eyes closed I can pretend I am in my armchair. I reach my hand out for the television



remote but it gropes unsuccessfully on the wooden slats of the bench next to me, not on the faded rose velvet of my armchair.

*My armchair with the bare patches on the arms where my wrists have worn away the nap of the material. The rip on one side that I fixed myself with duct tape. That side is pushed against the wall to hide the silver plasticky tape. The wallpaper has tiny doves on it. My wife chose the wallpaper. My wife. My son. My family.*

People walk past me in small groups, chattering. A bicycle bell dings repeatedly. I can remember my wife. Where is my son? Where have my family gone?

I know I have to call them. The ghost-phone on the side-table in my ghost-life memory rings.

The phone in the pocket of the girl who has sat down on the bench next to me is ringing. She looks at it and puts it back in her pocket unanswered. I roll the question in my mouth, trying to perfect it before speaking. At first I whisper.

She looks around me to see if I am talking to someone else. She checks over her own shoulder.

I ask her for a loan of her telephone.

She edges closer to the far side of the bench.

‘My wife is in hospital. I need to call my son and check how she is.’ The lie – so smooth on my tongue. Always easier than the truth.

Her hand twitches.

‘She had her operation this morning.’

The girl hands me the phone. I have to ask her to dial for me, my fingers are too sore and swollen for the tiny buttons. She sits next to me, head cocked to one side, fingers posed over her phone like a secretary. I open my mouth and wait for the numbers to flow out. Nothing comes.

The girl’s eyes start sliding around me again, perhaps checking for hidden cameras. ‘I have a lecture,’ she gets up, still holding the phone out.

I look at the dirt beneath my feet. There is a discarded paper napkin stuck in my mud. There are a lot of cigarette ends. When I look back up she has gone and I am grateful.

*The hint of my wife’s perfume. The hot-milk of my son’s head. The three of us stand in our tiny back yard and shake wet bed-sheets out and peg them to dry on the washing line.*

My returning memory is piece-meal. I can remember opening tins of food and heating them for myself, hands knotting and clumsy. I can remember the post bringing nothing but thin, brown envelopes. I can remember shaving off my beard, cutting the length of it with nail scissors and the shape of my chin being new to me.

My hand strokes my chin, tracing the outline I can still see so very clearly in the mirror. These are not memories from paper pages. These are too real, too possible, too painful.

Memories buy me no lunch. I lay the last two duff books out on the bench next to me. There is a small bird singing in a tree nearby. Summer is not too far away. Waking up warm will be an exciting new development. Pounding my chest, I spit at the foot of a nearby tree. The bird keeps singing. I stretch my legs in front of me and allow my knees to crack. The sun is back out and everything is pleasant. The unpleasantness at the library and the station start to fade and I can almost convince myself that I imagined it. Nothing but a story I once read. And those memories, nothing but bad dreams; this is who I am, this is how I spend my days. This is who I have always been.

I sleep for the rest of the morning. Nobody stops to purchase any of my books.

The door jangles shut behind me and the small, pot-bellied man with the bad moustache comes out from the back room.

‘No more crap from you,’ he says. ‘I only want to see the good stuff.’

‘Got a good one. No marks.’

‘The library have been on the phone again. They’ve told me to let them know if certain items turn up. Certain valuable items.’

‘No marks.’

‘My special customers rely on me for discretion. I always tell them everything here is watertight. Nobody makes me a liar.’

‘Nobody saw nothing.’

‘Get it out then. Which one is it?’ he leans forward. ‘Where are you hiding it?’

I reach up to heave my rucksack off my shoulder but it is not there. I check the other shoulder. I look down at my feet in case I set it on the floor when I came in. I did not.

The dealer taps his fingers on the counter.

Back at the bench, the bag is gone. Everything is gone. I peer at the people around me. One of them has taken my bag. It is as though I am back on the train and I am watching the people flow around me and I see my rucksack melt into my red suitcase and flow with them. The other passengers turn away from me and blend into nothing. I walk in circles to keep warm.

Outside the heavy black metal Library gates, I jig from side to side on the pavement like a small child in need of a lavatory. Then I clutch at my chest with one hand and throw the other in the air, pitching myself onto the pavement where the impact throws my face into confusion. It is late into the lunch-hour now so there are many people here to crowd around and express their concern.

I let them pull me up and the action pulls a fanfare of coughing out of my lungs. Right on cue the crowding well-wishers know I need to sit somewhere. I need a glass of water.

Surrounded by Samaritans all equally keen to get me off their hands now that they know I am not dead, I am through those double doors and able to breathe easily because I am close enough now to all these books with their many, twisting answers.

It does not take long for Deputy Assistant Manager Nathaniel Drake to investigate the commotion. Each of my departing saviours pats me on the shoulder as they go back to their offices, their shops and their homes. The glass of water is half empty before Deputy Assistant Manager Nathaniel Drake returns with the first-aid kit and sees who I am.

Not everyone has left me. A shrinking group hangs on tenaciously, offering to call people on my behalf. One of them breaks away to go find my bag.

Another mutters about blood sugar levels and asks if I am diabetic.

I shake my head.

Hissing as quietly as he can, Deputy Assistant Manager Nathaniel Drake makes it known to the space behind my left ear that he is ‘on to me’.

‘I think I am feeling better,’ I say to my new friends. ‘Perhaps I should go.’

They shoo and flutter and insist I do not try to move just yet. I block out their litany of disaster stories by concentrating on the figure of red-faced Deputy Assistant Manager Nathaniel Drake. He walks from Bay 17 (Fantasy/ Horror and Science Fiction) to Bay 9 (European and African Literature) and back again, his nails digging into his palms.

The man returns without my bag. He is very apologetic. He suggests he could take me to the Police Station and register that it has been stolen.

I shift on the straight-backed wooden chair and crane my neck.

Pacing faster, Deputy Assistant Manager Nathaniel Drake begins wringing his hands.

When the caring crowd asks if they can call someone I tell them my wife and I were due to meet here in the library when she finishes her class.

They smile and say how fortunate the coincidence is.

Deputy Assistant Manager Nathaniel Drake has stopped pacing and is listening in. His lips are pursed.

Sad and loath to depart, my new friends ask Deputy Assistant Manager Nathaniel Drake to keep an eye on me. They read his shiny name badge out-loud and thank him for his help.

Tight-lipped and thin-eyed, Deputy Assistant Manager Nathaniel Drake assures them that he will watch over me until I leave. When he helps me to the door half an hour later, I clutch at his side to support myself.

He starts to swear then checks himself, his eyes darting from side to side.

I slip my hand back out of his jacket pocket and go quietly.

*Once upon a time there was a young man whose life was an unwritten book. He was lonely in crowds. He hated being invisible. Then one day everything changed. Instead of seeing right through him, someone actually saw him. And loved him. And stayed with him. And they started a family together and he knew he would never be lonely or invisible again.*

A few days later I settle my back against a stack of plastic crates, I take out my most prized possession. Strange how people store such meaning in a wallet. It is shabby: he will have needed a new one anyway.

This is his wife. These are his two blonde children or his niece and nephew. I have decided that a man with such a cold heart has no business having the joys of offspring and beloved companion. This is the wife that left him. I hope he walked in on her and his best friend in bed together. These are the children who have stopped calling him Daddy on his monthly visits. They are older now but he likes to remember them when they were small and still needed him. Now I have taken them from him. I hope he has no other copy of this picture: the two blonde bairns all fat-legged and clutching spades.

Nathaniel Drake is a card man. Credit cards, debit card, Boots Advantage card, Tesco clubcard, his – hah! – his library card. They are all mine now.

I like to look at them. They wipe clean. The wallet itself is starting to disintegrate. He did not carry much money with him. The half-empty bottle of cider it bought me is already almost flat. I have not washed, I have not shaved. I have not changed my shirt. There is no point trying to pretend I am anything more than a tramp. ‘Spare some change?’

They walk past; nobody looks at me.

I mumble and repeat myself all day long. I crumple and uncrumple the photo of the children in my hands. It was old to begin with and now it is scored with white lines.

It has been – I think – a few weeks since I have been to Waverley Station. I welcome myself back, mumbling under my breath as I shuffle down the ramp.

‘Move out my road, old man.’ Three youths push past me. I can feel one of their hands inching towards my pocket.

I slap it.

The youth holds a fist up in my face and extends his middle finger.

I look past the fist to the destination board flickering behind him.

In the ticket office it is far too hot. So hot it makes my hands tremble. When it is my turn up at the desk I cannot get the words out, I can only cough. Finally I splutter through *London* and *Open Return* and the man behind the desk looks disgusted but starts tapping away at the keyboard. I ignore him until he tells me how much it will cost.

I try to hand over the card.

He tells me to put it in the machine.

I do not.

He takes it from me and demonstrates, the picture of endless patience.

‘I do not know my pin,’ I say.

He takes the card back out.

I hold my breath and maintain eye contact while he swipes it on his side of the desk. My signature falls off the page as I sign and I have to wipe my mouth on my sleeve after coughing. The man holds it up to compare the signatures. I take the ticket from the machine and I run.



Never look back. Whatever they shout after you, never look back. It slows you down. Even if you think you are going to collapse from coughing, do not stop running.

Unable to stop in time, I take a metal bar to the solar plexus, winding myself on the turnstile to the toilets. I make it over but I crack my shoulder on the tiles on the other side and now there are even more people staring at me.

I can feel my entire side turning into a bruise. I have probably broken my hip. I should never have done any of this.

Arms come out of nowhere to pull me up. I slap at them. Someone takes my wrists and I am up and standing half bent over before I can hiss at them to leave me alone.

‘Nathaniel Drake?’

I do not look up.

‘Nathaniel Drake? Sir?’ The ticket clerk is standing there, holding the credit card.

‘My stomach,’ I say. I rub my side.

He gives me the card and my receipt. ‘Food poisoning?’ He looks sympathetic.

I grunt and scuttle into the toilets. In the cubicle my hands are shaking so hard that I cannot get the credit card back in my coat pocket. I can hear someone talking to me. Then I realise it is not someone else, it is my own voice, repeating the same five words over and over. *There is no place like home. There is no place like home. There is no place like home.*

## (iii)

*Once upon a time there was a young man whose life was an unwritten book. He was lonely in crowds. He hated being invisible. Then one day everything changed. Instead of seeing right through him, someone actually saw him. And loved him. And stayed with him. And they started a family together and he knew he would never be lonely or invisible again, so long as he kept lying and they kept believing him.*

I lied before. At the beginning of this story. I said that I was going home; I have been without a home for half a century since my wife packed the medium-sized red suitcase with her things and the smallest red suitcase with clothes for our son and went back to her family in Spain.

At first I sat and drank more and raged more and waited for them to come back. Days trickled into weeks and then months. My thoughts about her were both desire and warning.

One day I took the last of the three red leather suitcases down from on top of the dusty wardrobe and put everything that mattered into it; all the leftover secrets of our lives and lies together. I locked the front door and posted the key through the letterbox.

I took a bus to the city and stood in the central square and put down the red suitcase and walked away with a rigid neck and a paperback in my pocket.

A few hours later I broke my resolve and came back for it but it was gone and with it was everything that made me who I was. I sat at the foot of a statue and read my book until it was dark.

The first two hotels asked for payment upfront. I stayed at the third. If I were to give my son some advice – if we were still in touch, if there was a chance he would stop and listen to what I had to say – I'd tell him this: the world is not your oyster but that does not stop you from taking the pearl.

I could write a book about how to jettison oneself; *A Gentleman's Guide To Ceasing Discreetly*. Were I younger, I could find a business model and set up an agency to aid people in their vanishing acts. Some enterprising soul surely will; for those too squeamish to commit suicide; for people who have given up on their lives but not on life itself; for people who cannot help but hang on.

The carriage of the first train to London is too small; I cannot breathe. I get off at the first stop, taking a random suitcase with me. The suitcase is surprisingly light for such a large case. It is dark blue with black edging. Not too new, not too old. I pull it off the rack, expecting to stumble under the weight and bracing myself but I almost fall back instead because of the lightness. I do not have time to think or hesitate or try to swap it; I am moving with the suitcase as naturally as if it were really mine. This is the trick; as a wise man once said, *be the change you want to see*.

On the small countryside platform I wait for someone to stop me. The train pulls away. I wait in a dwam, expecting for it to reverse and pull back. The train disappears

into the distance and there is a break when the sound of it carries off and is replaced by birdsong. Nothing but birdsong. No traffic, no people no hustling, no machinery. I think that I must be on holiday because there is a lightness inside me. Oh Lucia, light of my life. If I had brought you and our bairn out to live in the birdsong of the countryside then would you have left me? What people we could have been: what lives we might have lived, together.

Alone on the platform, I open the suitcase. Woman's clothing; poor quality, cheap stuff. Some scented cosmetics which clog my nostrils and make me break off to cough and spit over the edge down on the tracks where old drink cans are rusting. This was an unfortunate pick. A hairbrush – pink plastic but still serviceable. A novel by Kitty Patterson with gold and pink covers patterned with silhouettes of swooning figures; *Mother's Ruin*.

I sit on the ground next to the open suitcase with the hairbrush and the book to one side of me. I finger the credit card in my pocket and ask myself what Nathaniel Drake would do. He would go home for a bath and eat a microwaveable meal. He'd look at the calendar and search on a computer to decide what to do with the now-much-older bairns this weekend – anything to stop those long and lonely silences – then he'd finish his ironing in front of *Eastenders*. Nathaniel Drake's body is a good few decades younger than mine so he would probably still be thinking about jogging, not actually jogging but thinking he ought to after that lecture from the doctor about his waist to heart-attack ratio.

Nathaniel Drake would go home and I have no-one better to be. I put the hairbrush in my pocket, cross over to the other platform and wait for the next train whilst

listening to the birds. I balance one book on my knee and jog it up and down in time to a wee tune caught my head. When a train arrives it is Nathaniel Drake who gets on, looking for his red suitcase.

# 1

**Dr Leah Beaufort Steps Out**

**In the test case under analysis, Subject A has had zero contact with biological relatives beyond her own daughter, and has experienced minimal interaction between extended networks of an adopted ‘family’.**

Paper given at 13<sup>th</sup> INFORMS Applied Probability Conference, 2005

## 11 February 2011

Q: how many eggs can you put in an empty basket?

Today is the twenty-sixth anniversary of my father's death. Almost half of it will be spent travelling south to meet my mother. In three day's time I'm going to vanish.

## 25 December 2010

Q: if you take three buttons from five buttons, how many buttons do you have?

The continuing ring breaks the post-dinner dullness in our heads so I push myself up from the floor, my back itching from the heat of the fire. My mother sets her brandy glass down, missing the coaster and slopping a little onto the polished surface. She makes a wailing, complaining noise like a cat thrown off a lap and waves for me to sit back down. 'Leave it, darling. It'll just be something depressing.'

'My legs are asleep.'

'Fetch me a coffee then.'

'It might be Maureen.'

My mother rolls her eyes and sticks her tongue out. 'The home doesn't have this number. Just my mobile.'

I don't know if she is lying, her idea of the truth being bendier than mine. My legs spring with pins and needles. The phone keeps on, shrill and incessant.

'Seriously darling, leave it.'

I wander into the hallway with the handset, away from the evening service on the radio. I can hear my mother reaching for her brandy glass and knocking the box of tissues



onto the carpet. The hall smells of soup. As I pull the door to, she calls after me, reminding me that we haven't opened presents yet. 'Tell them where to stick it, darling, and hurry back. We'll let ourselves off good manners just this once.'

I don't recognise the voice. 'Marilyn? Is that Marilyn?' The woman's accent is flat. One of my mother's sadcase friends from the village.

I notice that a corner of the hall carpet is curling up and push it down with my bare toes. 'No.'

'May I talk to Marilyn please?'

'She's busy.'

'She's there? This is the right number?'

'She's busy. I'll pass on a message, if you like.' The carpet keeps curling back up. My back is stiff from the cold, wooden pews in church.

'It is imperative that I talk to Marilyn.' The voice wavers. Probably been sitting alone in their dining room, knocking back the sherries.

I bend over and push the carpet down with my hand. The slow stretch feels good.

'Put Marilyn on the phone now.'

'Who is this?' I ask.

'Her sister,' says the flat voice.

Back in the sitting-room, my mother has taken all the presents out from under the tree and put them on the rug in front of the fire. Her lips are moving in time with the hymn on the radio.

‘Wrong number,’ I say, still holding the handset. The phone rings again. I go back out into the hallway.

‘Marilyn?’

‘Stop calling.’ The next time the phone rings I answer and hang up immediately, without leaving the sitting room.

My mother swills the remainder of the brandy in her glass thoughtfully. ‘Having a fight with someone?’ she asks.

I shake my head.

‘Is it Jennifer?’

‘I haven’t fought with Jennifer since we were about five.’

‘Is it someone special?’

‘Can we open presents now?’

She passes over a package labelled ‘from Neil and Maureen’. I don’t even need to hold it to know that it is a DVD. I put the phone down on the carpet, and pick at the tape. The phone rings again. I move the handset out of my mother’s reach and hang up. The concert on the radio finishes and the news comes on. I pick up my present for my mother and pass it over. The phone rings. I hang up. My mother puts my present down and takes the handset from me. I go out into the hallway and start stretching out my other leg.

My mother’s voice starts as impatient; I picture the angry face on the chart the doctor used to show me, eyebrows drawn in heavily and low over the eyes. Mouth in a tight, straight line. Then she cries; sad face, teardrops on the cheeks. Then she laughs;

eyes screwed up, head tilted back and split open by the mouth. Then she cries again. Then she shuts the sitting-room door and my mind wipes white-clean of images.

In the kitchen I brew a pot of coffee. Through the wall I hear my mother switching off the radio. I sit at the kitchen table and drink cup after scalding cup of strong, black coffee. Outside the temperature drops; the timer for the boiler clicks on and hums like a ticking clock. Next door my mother talks with an animation I resent as a studied, personal insult. I unlock the top drawer of the dresser and take out a thin, silver spoon to stir my coffee.

As I drink my way through the entire cafetière the new frost spreads over the rim of the kitchen window. I think about isolation and objectivity. The notepad in front of me fills with repetitions of numbers as I search for a conclusive pattern, my mind numbing with autopilot. The intimate laughter of my mother's voice – audible through the wall – keeps breaking through. I put the equations on one side and instead I write a shopping list of numbers to check tomorrow; funding cuts for next semester; gas bill to be split; the likely cost of replacing the lamp beside my bed back in Edinburgh.

When she falls silent I listen for the click of the phone, licking the spoon clean then slipping it into my pocket. My shoulders are pushed forward and up, like a defensive cat. Finally, the click comes. I sit back and begin drumming my fingers on the kitchen table. The silence next door gives my imagination space to roam. She switches the radio back on.

The coffee left in my mug is cold before my mother taps on the kitchen door. 'Are you in there? Can I come in?'

I turn to face the window.

‘Leah, darling?’

‘It’s your home. Do what you like.’

‘I didn’t realise how late it was getting.’ She stays standing in the crook of the doorway. ‘Are you tired? Have you been working?’

‘I have an early start tomorrow.’

‘Don’t you want to know who that was?’

‘You haven’t opened my present.’ My reflection scowls back at me, my mother a hollow-faced shadow barely distinguishable in this light. The uncountable snowflakes swirl behind our ghost-images, blanking the recognisable world. In my pocket, I fit my thumb into the curve of the silver coffee spoon and press it hard into the warm metal.

### **3 January 2011**

Q: when do mice have eight feet?

Despite my many answer-phone messages delineating my schedule, it is dark outside before she calls me back. ‘The first words I heard were “we don’t want you,”’ she opens with more of a sob than a story. ‘I never belonged to anyone. I need you there. I don’t want to do this on my own.’

The third page of the brochure I’m holding is covered in a list of anonymous quotes praising the services offered. *It changed my life.* Answering my mother on autopilot, I turn to the checklist on page four. ‘I’m not going with you.’

‘You never put me first.’

Down goes the brochure on the duvet as I make the effort to avoid yet another repeat of the same conversation we’ve been having since Christmas. ‘Those people are nothing to me.’

‘They want to meet you. You’ll get to meet cousins, aunts, uncles. Real ones.’

‘I don’t want them. I’ve already got a family. You’ve already got a family.’

‘I want my real family.’

‘You’ve got me. You don’t need them.’ There is a pause, in which I can hear footsteps downstairs. It must be past six o’clock. Leaning round my new bedside lamp, I push the door shut. ‘We share ninety-eight percent of our genes with chimps, ninety percent with mice and eighty-five percent with zebra fish. These people are nothing more than a coincidence of biology.’

‘You don’t know what it’s like. You’re lucky. You’ve always known how much I wanted you, how much I loved you.’

‘Why now?’

‘I’ve been trying for years. You know that. God willing, now is the time He appointed.’

‘Why have *they* decided *they* want *you* now?’ Another pause, a longer one. I throw the tissue across the room, miscalculating the trajectory and missing the wastepaper bin. Rolling onto my back, the phone propped next to me on the pillow, I pick up the packet of pills from the bedside table and read the list of side effects silently while I wait for her to explain.

\*

My maternal grandparents; the only ones I intend to recognise. They were both short and dumpy and had a roughly equal amount of facial hair; I liked them.

‘They’re only your adopted grandparents, darling,’ my mother insisted. ‘They don’t really love Jesus and they don’t really love you.’ At their joint funeral she wore a navy blue trouser suit, and stood outside smoking during the wake while I helped my (adopted) cousins pass round trays of sandwiches. There was a man’s watch left by the sink in the kitchen: I pulled my sleeve down to cover it before taking the clingfilm off the next plate of mushroom vol-au-vents.

According to my mother, my father’s ungodly family stopped bothering with us soon after he died.

\*

Under her breath, my mother prays for guidance. There is a long, thin crack running like a fault line all across my bedroom ceiling which the landlord claims it is simply plaster settling. The ornate coving round the edge has old spider webs on it, too high to dust off without unusual effort. On the desk is a stack of notebooks – my research from last semester – and a blank piece of paper; my funding proposal for next year. My curtains don’t quite meet in the middle and the streetlamp outside currently provides the only light in the room.

There is still tomorrow's lecture for the Northern Universities Probability seminar series to prepare before dinner. I tell her I'm going to hang up now.

She still doesn't reply.

'You can call me tomorrow, if you need to.' Holding my hand over the mouthpiece, I count in my head until she puts the phone down. I pick the brochure back up and continue reading.

That night I pull my curtains fully open and watch the stars above the streetlamps and rooftops. My flatmate knocks on the door and I put the brochure under my pillow quickly, in case she invites herself in.

'Do you want some cocoa?' Alison stays on the landing, bobbing her head in and out of my room as she speaks.

'Do you know what time it is?'

'I heard you moving around last night. Is it boy trouble again?'

I shake my head.

After a while she closes the door and pads off into the kitchen. Since last summer Alison has started trying to feed me and make me leave the house at weekends to 'hang with her mates' and 'bond'. If she doesn't stop trying force these bisections into my life, I will talk to the landlord about rescinding the lease.

If I'm still here.

## 10 February 2011

Q: when will a mathematician die?

Scattered across the floor, the drawing pins look like constellations. I tell the undergraduate secretary I'm fine. 'I think that's the last one,' I say. 'Sorry.'

'Is your foot okay?' She fusses at the corner of the desk, trying to be discreet about moving things out of my reach. 'Was there anything else?'

'Just those registers. Thanks.' As I pick my briefcase up again, I spot another pin by the door. And another under the filing cabinet. I shut the door behind me too quickly and it sounds like I've slammed it, echoing along the not-empty-enough corridor.

Once safely in my office I lean on my desk, breathing too fast and as deeply as I can. I rest my hip against the radiator and the half-forgotten stapler in my pocket jabs me. I want to look at the brochure again, remind myself what I'm doing, but it's at home. Hidden in my underwear drawer, in a plain brown envelope, in a dark green plastic bag with 'Jenners' written in looping gold letters.

It took seventy job applications, five phone interviews and three face-to-face interviews before I made it here. Three years later and most of my boxes are still in storage. I can't remember what's in them that I thought worth keeping.

'Are you busy?' Malcolm is standing there, arms full of paper and face full of beard.

I make a non-committal noise and stand up straight.

'How's the fight against the Glaswegian Frequentists going today, Leah?'



‘Can I help you with something?’

‘Always a pleasure making small talk with you.’ He shuffles over and drops a folder on my desk. ‘Some light holiday marking.’

‘I’m not going on holiday.’

‘Plastic surgery perhaps?’ He is waggling his eyebrows. This means he thinks he is making a joke and I am not allowed to file an official complaint. ‘Having an abacus surgically implanted in your arm?’

‘When are these due back?’

‘End of next week.’

‘I’m on official leave from tomorrow until Tuesday. I sent an email round the department.’

‘The end of next week is after Tuesday. I don’t anticipate any problems with this lot. Lovely, conscientious boys and girls full of vim and vinegar.’ He has yellow teeth, overcrowding his mouth and fighting to escape when he laughs. ‘Going anywhere nice? Going to visit your young man?’

‘I have a class now.’

He laughs again and shuffles out.

I put the folder in my bag and start emptying my desk drawers. Then I remember and I put everything back where I found it.

Later than normal, I'm still walking in circles in my office. 'Just marking out some ideas,' I say and Dr Whittaker nods and leaves as silently as Dr Palmer and Suzanne have already.

The porter rings to tell me he's locking the doors and I'll have to use my card when I leave.

I tell him I know.

'Just checking, miss.'

I put the phone down and keep moving, repeating nonsense phrases in my head to help decelerate my heartbeat, as the leaflet from the doctor suggested: *Accurate acceleration of adjacent rates. Deduce the decimal distribution and define. Autonomous arcs of asymptote alternates.*

The porter rings back and asks if I know the heating stops at eight.

'Fine, I'm leaving now.' My hands itch as I straighten the stapler and the post-it notes. I check my notice-board again and there's nothing else I can safely remove. I leave the folder of marking on top of my keyboard with a note paper-clipped highlighting the deadline.

Three years ago, this was yet another sideways career shuffle into a junior lectureship whose only advantage was the number of miles between Edinburgh and my mother's cottage in Norfolk. It made no difference.

Back on the fringes of remembering, after my father's funeral. Coming back to the odd, empty house. Eating cold chicken. 'It's just you, me and Jesus now, darling,' my mother said. 'But that's fine. We don't need anyone else.'

\*

The trick – I'm instructed – is not to make it look like you planned to never come back. *Don't wash-up. Don't Hoover. Don't take the recycling out. Don't pay your bills ahead of schedule.* I have the brochure more or less memorised. *Don't force a reconciliation with your loved-ones. Don't leave them a letter. Don't call anyone out of the blue.* I circle the room one last time, fighting the urge to strip it bare. *Don't let it slip to a work colleague.*

On my way out I turn back and take the folder of marking. Something to read on the train. Something to keep my hands busy. Just what I'd normally do.

The last of the signed forms were sent by courier yesterday. I called my mother last week and asked for a copy of my birth certificate, twisting the old-fashioned phone cord round my fingers during the long silences.

'What do you need that for?' she asked.

'Travel insurance, for the conference next summer. The university is updating the system. The lawyers need a copy. Can you post it?'

'I don't have it.'

'Have you looked?'

She burst into tears. *How could I be so crude. Did I have no idea what something like a birth certificate meant to someone like her. How dare I force her to go through the awful trauma of sifting through family paperwork when I won't even come to London with her at what is the most crucial and unbearable point in her life.*

I stifled a yawn and Googled it instead. My birth certificate is now awaiting me at the General Register Office Family Records Centre, 1 Myddelton Street, London. The last of the documentation I need.

I called her back. 'Fine. I'll come.'

She told me I was making Jesus very happy by being such a dutiful daughter.

'You're paying for the hotel. I want a separate room. You're paying for my train fare too.'

She agreed too quickly. I should have asked her to fly me instead. I should have asked for separate hotels.

Monday will be the first day of the rest of my life.

## **11 February 2011**

Q: how many eggs can you put in an empty basket?

Holding the keys to the flat in my hand, my impulse is to throw them down a drain. Otherwise they could still be used to re-open this door; I could let myself back in; I could double-lock this door behind me, latch the safety chain and pull the duvet over my head and pretend the outside world is a dream.

Lumping and catching over the cobbles, the wheels of my suitcase throw me off balance. It's so loud that I'm inclined to carry it instead. Breathing deeply, in through my nose and out through my mouth. Trying not to slip on the patches of ice where the tall tenements keep a permanent shade over the edges of the pavement. Accelerating my pace to arrive more quickly, blocking out any doubts.

Keys still in my ungloved hand. Cold brass, cutting a pattern in my palm. Calculating the risks, rethinking the variables. Barely sleeping last night, I now blink and stumble against the clusters of early tourists daring each other to spit on the Heart of Midlothian.

\*

When my father died my mother put all of his personal papers on the fire and we watched them curl and blacken. She let me use the poker to break them up, her hand over mine to help with the weight. We couldn't let them smother the coals. She made me hold my breath and count to a silent ten.

'The slightest breeze will scatter them. Then the house will burn down too.' Her voice was pitched lower than usual. She said her eyes were red because the fire was smoking something rotten.

I nodded. The metal ornamentation on the handle of the poker left flower patterns fading red on my palm for the rest of the evening.

\*

Unsheltered on the platform with uncovered hair frizzing in the damp air, my hands are white where the handle of the suitcase digs in and purple where it doesn't. Waverley Station is busy for a Thursday mid-morning.

Delays posted up. Five minutes. Ten minutes. The key is in my pocket, warm now from being held. Back up by the Castle I've left a dent in the pillow where my head lay last night. Books out on my desk, pencils left unsharpened. Tins of baked beans in the cupboard and bread in the freezer and eggs in the door of the fridge because they'll keep until Tuesday. Milk emptied down the sink because it won't.

I'll never sleep under the crack in the ceiling again. Never sit on my bed and wonder what might fall through and change my life. Never turn the radio up to drown out the television next door. Never sit alone eating bread and jam for dinner because I'm too tired to cook.

These trousers are uncomfortable. I bought them for my first job interview. Nobody ever mentioned that one of the benefits of teaching in Higher Education was free biscuits. No more free biscuits, no more students, no more colleagues. No more marking, no more lectures, no more attempts to fix my name to something.

Stepping from side to side to stop my feet growing numb, I try not to wonder what there will be to look forward to; The Agency only releases the final details once the entire process is complete. According to the brochure this prevents links being forged between *Old Life* and *Real Life*. There must be a fair few dropouts. The legal details come second; the first stage was more like an assignment, an essay of reasons and

complaints. I had to call the secretary again. ‘I don’t know where to begin. The form is unusual.’

‘We find our clients generally have some trigger which brings them to us. If you read the guidance notes that came with the form, you’ll find a list of memory prompts.’

‘I’ve read them.’ I hadn’t. ‘I’m still not sure.’

She made clucking noises and suggested I had another look at the brochure.

I put the phone down and read the guidance notes, reluctantly. They asked for the trigger point, the one moment when it crystallised to me that my life really wasn’t worth living any more. *Many people dream about living life as another person. Do you have what it takes? To run somewhere, you must have something to run from. Please refer to the Case Studies in paragraph B.*

I knew the answer. Dreading going down south to visit. Shopping in Marks & Sparks for a cashmere sweater whilst wondering if I’m trying to buy my mother’s attention and if so how much it will cost me this time. Our normal Christmas, just my mother and me. Arguing over whether or not I am going to Midnight Mass with her. Burnt soup. Blocked-toilets. Twenty-six years of the two of us remembering my father, together. Twenty-six years of being told *we don’t need anyone else*. Three years of postdoc in Cambridge working it through and giving up everything because I’d proven her right – mathematically. Then this year a phone call comes and it turns out that she was lying all along: I wasn’t enough for her either.

Now there's a twenty minute delay until the train arrives. I put the suitcase down in the puddle at my feet and rub my hands together until they are pale and tingling. I put them in my pockets then pull my left hand out as soon as it touches the key.

## 14 February 2011

Q: when things go wrong, what can you always count on?

~~My mother~~ *That woman* is shouting at me, 'Let me in. I can explain.' *Blah blah blah*. Her voice is reduced by the wood.

'I hope you die.' I shout where the door meets the jamb, through the barest of cracks, my own hot breath echoing back into my mouth. My knees are sore from the rough fabric of the uncomfortable, tweed armchair I have dragged in front of the locked door; I had intended to barricade it with the trouser press, but it turned out to be attached to the wall. I'm confident that I can check-out before anyone discovers the damage.

The brown envelope from the General Register Office Family Records Centre is still in my handbag, thrown on the bed with my coat. Standing up on the seat of the armchair, I press my eye up against the spy-hole. She's doing her breathing thing and fanning herself with the Valentine's card. I hammer on the door to get her attention. 'I hate you,' I shout. 'You're nothing to me now.' I get back down off the chair and go to open the window. My book is half under the radiator, pink and gold cover bent back from being kicked across the room in the small hours of the night.

The phone rings.



I tell the manager that the woman outside my room has been threatening me in a very violent, very physical way. ‘No. I’ve no idea who she is.’ I put the phone down and get myself a glass of water from the bathroom. I move the chair back into its original position in case they want to come into the room after they’ve removed ~~my mother~~ *that woman*. I put a towel over the plaster dust by the trouser press. I open the window and wait for her to be brought outside.

My hands are shaking as I dial The Agency’s number. The smell of traffic roars in the open window.

‘This is Dr Leah Beaufort,’ I say. ‘I’ve changed my mind.’

## **13 February 2011**

Q: why did the chicken cross the Moebius strip?

During my nap, the remote has slid under a pillow, so I have to hunt around for a while before I’m able to mute the television. I put the voicemail on speaker. It’s The Agency – again – confirming my appointment for tomorrow and politely reminding me about the outstanding paperwork. They repeat the request for me to call them back – *to confirm that the required documentation has been legally and successfully obtained* – but they don’t leave a number. They never leave a number.

My dress for the ‘family’ event needs to be ironed: I’ve been putting this off as well. While the phone rings, I take it through to the bathroom and hang it off the shower

rail. I shake the pleats out. The uncut shop tags rustle against each other and I think about dropping it in the bath and refusing to go because I have nothing to wear.

‘Leah Beaufort, calling to cancel tomorrow’s appointment.’

The secretary is as unsurprised as every time I’ve called. She tells me the deposit is unrefundable but may be transferred to future changes in circumstance so long as all the paperwork is completed.

‘I won’t change my mind.’

‘As you wish Dr Beaufort.’

I tell her I’ve changed my mind, I’ll finish the paperwork. Just to keep things tidy.

I can hear her fingernails tapping on the keyboard as she brings up my records.

‘Please read out the full details on the birth certificate, Dr Beaufort.’

The envelope is in the file with the information pack. I tell the secretary to hold on and I open it up, being careful not to rip the contents. There are two pieces of paper inside. I read them both.

I read them again.

‘Dr Beaufort. The full details please.’

‘There’s some mistake. They’ve given me the wrong envelope.’

‘Would you prefer for us to call you back, Dr Beaufort?’

I agree that might be for the best. I put the certificates back in the envelope.

When my mother knocks on the door, I’m vomiting in the toilet. I can hear her tapping her foot on the carpet outside. I wipe my mouth and let her in.

‘What’s this, darling? Why aren’t you wearing the dress?’ she sniffs at the air.

‘Have you been drinking?’

‘I’m not going.’

‘We have an hour. No rush.’

I let her push past me into the bedroom.

‘Darling, are you feeling unwell? Is it nerves?’

I lock myself back in the bathroom and bring up another mouthful of bile.

She’s sitting on the edge of the bed, flicking through my book. I pull my head back into the bathroom and spit the mouthwash into the sink, take a deep breath, and go to sit next to her. ‘My stomach’s been acting up all afternoon.’

‘Nonsense, darling. Take some powders and you’ll be fine.’ She looks at my stomach and narrows her eyes. ‘Have you something you’d like to tell me?’

‘I’m not pregnant.’

She waves a hand at me dismissively.

‘Do you know an André Ortega?’

‘Is that the Spanish exhibition at The Tate?’ She’s still holding my book on her lap, eyeing up my waist. I cross my arms across my chest and before I can ask again, another wave of nausea floods my gut and I barely make it to the bathroom before I’m heaving up an empty stomach.

The front desk confirms that my mother’s taxi has left for the reunion. I order room service. I take the certificates out of the envelope and look at them again.

Born, to Erica Gordonstoun, a baby girl. Father written in as Andre Ortega, then crossed out and *unknown* written above it. Clearly the wrong certificate. But then the other certificate complicates matters. Marilyn and Arthur Beaufort, housewife and plumber, adopting a Leah Gordonstoun about three days after Erica Gordonstoun gives birth. On my birthday.

The phone call to The Agency only takes a minute. ‘Yes, I have it. I have them. Both my certificates. Birth and adoption.’

‘Thank you, Dr Beaufort. We look forward to processing your application.’

I throw the mobile down on the bed and that’s when I notice that my book is missing.

The time has just flown today. It’s already dark outside. The big family reunion was supposed to start at five. I can’t believe my mother hasn’t called to check if I’m alright. I can’t believe she went, leaving her own child vomiting alone in a hotel room.

Except I’m not her child.

I read my birth certificate again. And again. And again. And again: reading it doesn’t mean it makes sense. My father was not called André. My mother is not called Erica.

Imagine if I’d left it in the envelope until Monday. Handed it over to the agency without peeking. Vanished for all the wrong reasons. Since staring at the birth certificate has not changed the names written on it, I put it back in the envelope, then I put it with the rest of my paperwork for The Agency. Passport. Bank statements. Neat and orderly

and ready for action. I don't need to look at it again until Monday. I don't even need to look at it then. I can just hand it over.

As I put the documents back in my bag, I find the Valentine card.

The hotel receptionist is very polite. They make the photocopies for me while I wait, supporting myself against the smooth, polished wood of the front desk. It is difficult to focus and I can taste the metallic desire to vomit at the back of my throat: the natural result of drinking the minibar before coming down here.

I lick the red envelope and cut my tongue slightly on the edge of the flap. Apologising to the receptionist for my language, I ask her to give the message to Mrs Beaufort in the morning, not this evening.

She agrees politely.

I repeat the instructions and turn towards the lift. Then I remember my missing book. I smile at the receptionist. 'Just one more thing—'

After dropping my mother's room keys back at reception I return to my room, lie on the bed and read my book. I'm halfway through chapter three when the text comes in. For a moment I can't remember where I am: I don't know if it's the gin or the book that's confusing me.

It's from ~~my mother~~ *that woman*. She wants to know if I'm coming to meet them after the dinner. I switch my mobile off. I turn the page over. I hate leaving a story half-finished.

An hour later, I turn back to the first page. It says – very clearly – *all names have been changed*. I keep reading.

## **12 February 2011**

Q: why is six afraid of seven?

No point in hanging around. I tuck the brown envelope into my handbag and thank the woman behind the counter. She says goodbye without looking up from her computer screen.

Outside the rain has stopped but the wind is still strong and my hair slaps into my mouth. Holding the bag between my knees, I scrape it back into a ponytail. There's a card shop on the corner. In between the rows of red envelopes and pink, heart-shaped confetti I can see that I look normal, not at all unusual, just any other person on any other street.

Now that the final piece in the puzzle is safely in my possession, Sunday seems too far away. I could end my life without the fuss and expense I've been putting myself through the last couple of months. I could walk into the road and wait for traffic. I could jump off the roof-terrace at the hotel. I could get the train out to Brighton and walk into the sea, pockets full of rocks.

I could still cancel this.

Last time I sent a Valentine card, I was dumped before it arrived in the first post. Mark told me I had to choose between him and my mother and I hesitated. He texted

when he got back to his flat and read it. His voicemail was only two words long: *sorry babes*. Two words, half as many as I'd written in the card. *Will you marry me*. Five years together, reduced to nothing in the space of five minutes.

The move from Cambridge to Scotland was to prove to him that I could change. He never called me back or answered my emails. My mother said she always thought Mark was 'a bit of a damp little squib, darling. So glad he won't be coming around anymore.'

There's a particularly garish card in the shop window, with cartoon bluebirds tweeting each other. I walk inside and pick it up, turning it over and over in my hands until the girl starts serving someone else.

Out on the street I slip the card out from under my arm and into my bag next to the brown envelope from the Family Registry. I stand on the edge of the pavement, toes over the kerb, rocking.

It strikes me that I am capable of making mistakes. I think about the old man on the train and I wonder what it might be like to share the burden of my mother with a family.

With our family.

My mother told me yesterday how excited they all are to meet me tonight. I still feel numb. I wonder if Mark is still at the same address.

## 11 February 2011

Q: how many eggs can you put in an empty basket?

There are two chicken salad sandwiches wrapped in tin foil in my handbag. Sitting on a train, nowhere to go but through to the buffet car, or along to the toilet, stripped back to basic emotional needs: sleep and food. I feel nothing. I think nothing.

According to the brochure, *anger blinds us to possibility*. I must remember that, looking out the scratched train window, watching the fields roll by. It's curiously quiet in this carriage. I can feel that I'm tipping on the edge of something momentous, and everything is basking in a new glow of significance.

\*

'Significance is a personal thing,' the secretary told me, down the phone.

I could hear her typing still, barely missing a beat while I asked questions.

'We tend to attribute it falsely, based on our desires.'

I wanted to ask her what she thought my desires were, but she sounded bored enough of the conversation already. 'I'm exceptionally interested in knowing more about the programme.'

'I'll put a brochure in the post immediately. Repeat your postcode please.'

The brochure arrived the next day, special delivery in a plain brown envelope. I told myself that I could never actually go through with it, that it was simply a compulsive expression of some inner anxieties.



I cancelled my next therapy appointment, spending the money on The Agency's introductory DVD.

\*

The brochure is in the bottom of my overnight bag, in an old university-branded folder. I wouldn't put it past my mother to go through my things at the hotel so I've disguised it as work.

The people we love are supposed to love us back, that's the binding deal. It's a deal I keep mismanaging: my friends, my family, my father, Mark – and now – my mother. *You only get one chance at a fresh start. If you do something twice, it counts as a habit. Habits are not fresh. Habits tie you to things, and to people. If you run away twice, you're going to keep running for the rest of your life.* The Agency's brochure makes a good point.

It's an old, unappealing version of a train. The stuffing in the seats is falling out of badly stitched patches. The plastic fitments have faded patches of graffiti, and every surface seems scratched. My head lolls against the window during a moment of almost-sleeping, and I wonder what germs have transferred from that grimy condensation into my hair. As soon as I wonder, my scalp starts itching.

Spread precariously across both the pull-down table in front of me and the one for the seat next to me are the students' extended problem-sets. The pen rolls from paper to paper with the swaying of the carriage.

I should have brought a book with me. I was going to – I usually would – but it took me six months to finish *Cloud Atlas*, by which time Richard and Judy had long moved on to something else and I felt like an idiot for reading so slowly. If I started a book now, chances are I wouldn't finish it before I vanished and – of course – I wouldn't be able to take it with me. If I ever got hold of another copy, I'd be traducing the first rule of not actively bringing anything from *Old-Life* with you into *Real-Life*.

A magazine would have made a happy half-way house. I wouldn't mind leaving a magazine on the train, or at the offices on Sunday. There's something inherently disposable about a magazine. Perhaps there is a concession stand in the buffet car though, considering the state of this carriage, I doubt it.

Perhaps a novella. Or an anthology of short stories. Maybe a newspaper. It's all elementary, I don't have any of these things. There must be a survey out there, the top ten books people are actively happy not to finish. But what's the point in starting something you don't want to see through to the end.

Once I was accepted for the programme, they sent me the full induction pack. It is drummed into applicants that this is not something for which one can prepare. *Do not attempt to double-guess The Agency. The actions of The Agency are not your concern. Your own actions are no longer your concern.*

\*

I had to write it all down, for the application process. They don't accept just anyone; there's a wall of bureaucracy to clamber over before getting close. Utility bills, driving

license, passport, any contracts you're still technically under, any contracts that have recently expired. Endless lists. Lists of surviving family members, lists of close friends, lists of colleagues, lists of acquaintances. Police records. Disclosure checks.

Initially, I was concerned that my mother's recently expanded genealogy would cause a bureaucratic nightmare of unfathomable proportions. I truncated my list of family members.

They asked me to resubmit.

When I explained both my lack of knowledge about and my lack of interest in my mother's biological family, they told me that for an extra fee they could process that part of my application separately.

'How much?' I repeated, sitting down abruptly on the edge of the desk.

'Which includes all proof-efforts against variables, including blood-typing and adoption processes.'

'If I choose not to pay?'

'We will need three bound copies of the heritage charts, as outlined in subsection twelve, from both maternal and paternal lines.'

I told them I would pay and cashed in the last of the bonds my father left me.

\*

Streaking the windows, the sleet outside slides the landscape into a grey blur. If this train was to be washed away into the frozen landscape of the Scottish borders, I do not know who would miss me. Perhaps that is how it will be done on Sunday; there will be a car

accident and an unidentifiable body. A letter left on the riverside, next to a pile of clothing. They must do something, to stop people coming after those who vanish.

Calculating the binomial expansion of the probability of any of these people in the carriage with me being my new relations occupies a decent stretch of time. I scribble equations on the cover sheet of the top problem-set in the marking pile.

‘Tickets please.’

I check my purse, then find my ticket in my coat pocket.

‘Tickets from Edinburgh.’ When the inspector reaches my seat, he looks at the papers in front of me. ‘I loved maths at school,’ he takes my ticket and peers at it. ‘Seat reservation?’

I pass it over.

He punches a hole in both pieces of card. ‘Professor, are you?’

‘Lecturer.’

‘Calculus?’ he holds the tickets up, inspecting his handiwork.

‘Hardly.’

He stands there, tilting his head on one side. His beard needs a trim and also a wash. His uniform has shiny patches on the shoulders.

‘Applied probability. Currently, I specialise in non-linear possibilities.’

‘Right. Fractions, yeah. Percentages too.’

I pick the pen up again and correct one of my higher variables.

‘I’ve been thinking about taking up a night course. Might do maths again.’

I expand the parameters further, taking into consideration the possible fecundity of my mother's new biological siblings.

'Difficult with the shifts system, mind you. Never know if I'll be halfway to Aberdeen when I ought to be doing my homework.' He lets off a short series of huffing barks that I assume are supposed to correspond with humour.

'Is there a problem with my ticket?'

'Right. Yeah,' he gives them back. 'Enjoy the fractions.' His nasal voice continues along the carriage behind me, asking for tickets and railcards.

Visualising the equation always helps: to my right is a nervous looking woman in her late forties. She could fall under the category of either aunt or cousin. Given the quirks of human interactions she could even be my step-grandmother. I know little about the wider web of my mother's new, favourite family. My mother's mother is dead, that's one person I can rule out of being forced to meet. Fingers crossed some horrific accident wiped out most of the rest of them too. That might explain why they're so keen to claw my mother back into their fold, after all these years.

Why we're meeting in London, nobody has bothered to inform me. Maybe some of them live in London. Maybe all of them do. For all I know, they could all work for The Agency and this is going to become awkward at an unparalleled level when they read my case file and discover why I'm so keen to end my *old life*.

I can stop the process any time I choose. Any time at all. I haven't burnt any bridges. I could even go to the reunion with my mother, on Saturday night. I brought a dress.

An altercation commences in the carriage behind me. I glance down the aisle and the grease-shiny uniform of the ticket inspector is blocking most of my view. His victim appears to be male, clad in a check suit and seems to be trying to hide under the table.

‘I’ve been watching you, pal,’ the ticket inspector is leaning on the table, pushing his face down at the half-hidden trouble-maker. ‘I don’t want your type on my train.’

I can’t hear what his victim is saying to provoke this.

The ticket inspector threatens to throw him off the train for theft. They’re practically wrestling now and the rest of us in the carriage – few as we are – have been reduced to silence. I move the marking onto the seat next to me and kneel up on my seat, my waistband cutting into my midriff as I twist. The inspector grabs the man’s arm and pulls him into the aisle.

The victim is nothing more than a shrinking, fragile old man. He’s dressed in a check suit and looks like he should have a hat and cane stashed somewhere nearby. Perhaps he has lost his hat in the struggle with the ticket-inspector. His big, blue frail eyes almost remind me of something. He looks about the right age to be my mother’s biological father.

We’re on the same train, potentially all heading to London; perhaps he is also heading to the same metaphorical destination? It’s not out with the realms of possibility that this old man is my grandfather, that the chav over there is my cousin, that the woman who hurried past to the buffet car a few minutes ago is my aunt. Not out with the realms of possibility, but not the most likely of outcomes. If he were to be my grandfather, does

it really matter, since he has no place in my life either way? I do not care one bit for or about my mother's obsession with her blood-relatives.

From my new position, I still cannot hear clearly what the old man is saying, but I can see that he is protesting his innocence. Those big blue eyes are asking for help. I don't care. The old man yelps as the ticket inspector tries to pull something out of his hands. He yanks back with his elbow and the old man lets go. It's a book. The old man pulls his hands back in to his chest fast and begins to rub at one wrist.

I listen to the nasal accusations of theft and try to interpret the feeble, mumbling denials. The old man's big blue eyes are watery.

'He's telling the truth.' I have to cough and repeat myself louder before the ticket inspector takes any notice. 'I saw a passenger, a woman, leave the book on the table when she got off at the last stop.'

They're both watching me now. My palms are hot as I grip the rough material of the headrest.

'It's going in Lost Property then, pal.'

'She left it on purpose. She offered it to me, but I said I had too much work and wouldn't be able to resist the distraction.'

The old man's arms are hanging limply by his sides. He looks so vulnerable.

\*

They found me through Facebook. I detest social networking sites but it is necessary to master them, for teaching undergrads. It's easiest method of checking up on their excuses

for missing seminars or being late with problem-sets. One would have thought that if they had the brains to get into university, they'd be able to work out that we keep tabs on what they're up to. What they write about themselves, about each other. About us.

Some person messaged me, looking for my mother. He wanted to know if I was Marilyn's daughter, if Marilyn was still alive. This would be about four years ago. Perhaps it was all bullshit, a con job to get money out of a vulnerable widow. I changed my privacy settings and didn't reply to any of his messages. It was so close to all the problems with Mark, I didn't want to lose her too. I was so angry about it: apart from anything else it screwed with my postdoc research. I applied for the job in Edinburgh shortly after that, the one I didn't get. I haven't thought much about it, not until Christmas.

I never told my mother that her family came looking for her back then. When she finds out this weekend, she'll never want to talk to me again. Better that I vanish first.

\*

Breaking the deadlock of the ticket inspector's stare, I slide off my seat and walk over to them, knocking into the armrests of the empty seats with each rock of the carriage. I hold my tickets up. The old man is looking through all his pockets. He's staring at his empty hands.

The ticket inspector turns away from me and repeats his request to check all tickets.



‘He’s clearly upset. Come back later and ask him then.’ The words come out without passing through my brain first. I consider punching the ticket inspector to punctuate my point. I crack my knuckles instead, then the apex of the adrenaline dies away and I can feel everyone staring at me and I want to go back to my seat and finish calculating the binomials. The adrenaline leaves cold patches under my skin.

‘Right, that isn’t official procedure, yeah.’ His voice trails into uncertainty.

I don’t say it and neither does he, but the words *Is it official procedure to accuse an innocent passenger of theft and threaten to have them thrown off the train?* are making a lovely banner in the air between our heads. He leaves, checking the remaining tickets in the carriage whilst pointedly ignoring both myself and the old man. He won’t be back this way anytime soon.

Neither the old man nor I have anything to say about my lie. The chances are it was close enough to the truth to pass him by.

‘I’m Dr Beaufort,’ he doesn’t respond to my introduction. ‘Leah Beaufort.’ I pick the book up and hold it out to him. It’s the latest Kitty Patterson – all pink and gold and swooning women – and the spine is broken. Who would steal a second-hand book? He must be innocent. He’s still patting at his jacket pockets. I put the book down, as close to him as I can manage without stepping further forward, and hesitate in the aisle until it feels right to leave him alone and return to my seat.

Finally, the old man starts saying thank you, which is my signal to escape. ‘Would you be caring to join me, Dr Beaufort?’

Before I can decline, he has seated himself and his hands are resting on the table, trembling, liver spotted and expectant. I fetch my possessions over, placing the pile of marking as neatly as possible on the table, stacked against the window. I stay standing and re-organise the papers. 'I didn't catch your name,' I say. 'How far are you going?'

Instead of replying, he pats the seat next to him.

I sit across the table from him instead. The check on his jacket and the check on his trousers don't match. There's a watermark of a stain over his right leg. He is wearing his collar buttoned up and no tie. No hat, but at least his hair is combed. He is clean-shaven. He doesn't smell, from this distance. I ask him again where he is headed, raising my voice in case he is deaf.

Picking up the paperback, the old man turns it over and starts reading the blurb out to me, pausing at the end of each sentence to look up at me with his big, watery-blue eyes. His lips move as he reads. 'Do you like books, Dr Beaufort?' he asks. 'Are you a fan of literature?'

'Leah. And what am I to call you?' I exaggerate the shape of my mouth and speak slowly.

He mumbles something I can't catch, putting the book down next to my bag. I offer to help him look for his ticket.

He turns the book so that it is title-down on the table. 'Books are my life, Dr Beaufort. They have so much to teach us.'

I tune out as he mumbles through some tale of the importance of reading between the lines. My mind wanders, trying to guess his name. There's some literature for you,

Shakespeare even. *What's in a name?* I officially christen him Gramps, for lack of a real moniker. I try to remember what my mother thought her biological father's name was. Now I wish I had listened to her after all, rather than putting the phone down when she tried to tell me about *them*. I scan his face, trying to see my mother's jaw, my own cheekbones. I look for myself in his eyes.

When I snap back into paying attention it takes me a moment to work out that Gramps has stopped talking and is holding my iPod, which I do not remember having taken out. My bag is on its side, lolling against the pile of papers still unmarked. It must have slipped out.

It's an awkward moment, but I take it back, push it right to the bottom of the bag, and move the bag onto the seat next to me. The action shouts out *overly suspicious, untrusting bitch*. There's a clink, and the refreshments trolley stops next to us. It seems that Gramps has stopped talking because he is thirsty. I ask if he is going all the way to London.

'I must buy you a cup of something. I must show you my appreciation.' Gramps reaches his hand across the table to touch my arm, patting it gently to get my attention.

I politely decline.

He insists.

I tell him I'm not thirsty.

He offers me a biscuit. I think about how I snatched the iPod from him. 'Tea. No milk. No sugar. That's very kind of you.'

He's so grateful, he repeats. So very grateful. He has a coffee. Five sugars. Two small pots of cream. Once we've been served, there is a fumbling pause as Gramps looks for his wallet. I clue in before he does, remembering his inability to find his train ticket and the depths of his embarrassment. I pay and Gramps burbles away merrily, waving his arms and expressing his undying gratitude. I help him take the plastic sipping cap properly off the paper cup, to add the last of the sugars.

This is when some idiot with a chunky laptop bag decides to run full-throttle down the corridor. He knocks to one side as the train junkets, and sends the coffee flying over us. I am lightly splashed, but nothing significant; Gramps is soaked.

Jumping up and verbally letting rip, I move my pile of marking out of the way of the puddling coffee on the table.

The idiot apologises to me and to Gramps, who he refers to as my grandfather.

Neither of us correct him.

I look up from my mewling, coffee-soaked companion, and for a minute I think it's Mark and my mouth drops open a little and I have to sit down, heavily, before my legs give way. On a second glance the idiot with the laptop bag isn't bad looking, but it clearly isn't Mark. About the same height, with dark hair streaked with thick grey stripes, a properly shaped haircut, not just a couple of quid handed over to some fool with a pair of clippers. Nicely dressed, if somewhat shambolically, in a big, dark overcoat which looks very appropriate for this weather. His clothes look expensive.

My hand is patting my hair with the coyness of a Stepford Wife before I can stop myself.

His eyes slide over me. I'm used to not registering with people. 'I'll get something to clean that up.' He speaks to the air above my head and bounds away after the trolley. Gramps just sits there, holding his coffee-soaked arm out at a right-angle, dripping all over the table. I get up again, moving the rest of the pile of marking – not too badly splattered – onto the seat as I do so. He's like a child, with a wobbling lip and not a clue of where to start cleaning himself up. I have to undo the buttons and pull the jacket off him, twisting his arms as I do so. I only realise I'm being rough when he lets out a small whimper.

It feels just awful, like accidentally kicking a puppy, but who is he to me and why should I be stuck cleaning up someone else's mess.

By the time the idiot comes back, I've moved Gramps to the table across the way and spread his jacket over the headrest of the coffee-stained seat to dry off. I've moved my things across as well, because the pool of coffee is lapping from one side of the table to the other, and if this train goes at any more of a pace then I'm pretty certain it'll slop over. Anyway, I couldn't think of a polite way of not sitting with him; he looks so lost.

If he were really my grandfather, I'd be meaner. Get in a few pinches for my mother's sake. Make a few caustic remarks about people not living up to their responsibilities. Trip him in the aisle. Small and petty, yes, but ultimately satisfying. Imagine her face if I turned up at King's Cross holding him by the scruff of his collar.

'Who is this? What are you doing?' she'd say.

'Let's sit down. Get a drink,' I'd keep calm, play it cool. 'I'll tell you everything.'

Her mouth would hang open. She'd cry. She'd hug me. 'I'm so proud of you. Thank you. God bless you, darling.' Repeated over and over again. Then she'd hug Gramps – her father, my grandfather – or slap him. Maybe both. Then she'd make him explain away the whole of her life in the shadow of his absence. My father's absence too. He could rewrite our story.

If that story could be something along the lines of: *We only gave you up because we loved you so much.* Or: *We had no choice. I've regretted it every day, every moment since then. The only relief your mother knew was the day she died.* That would be apt.

Apt, but impossible. Why didn't my mother's biological mother want contact? She had her chance.

Not my problem; not my life. This is just some old man, confused about where he is going or where he has come from and he has nothing to do with me.

When the idiot comes back, his pockets are stuffed with paper napkins and he is carrying a fresh cup of coffee. I wait for him to put it down on the clean table. 'Five sugars. Two servings of cream.' I am the voice of authority on all matters to do with this strange old man and his likes and dislikes. *Look at me, Idiot*, my eyes say, flirtatiously.

He blinks and goes back up the aisle. When he returns he introduces himself as Jacob.

I say hello and pretend to turn my attention to the damp, shivering old man. Gramps sits still and lets me dab at him with the napkins. When Jacob tries to help, I shoulder him out the way, so he has a go at the coffee-wet jacket instead. We blot together in silence. Then Gramps hems his way through a small coughing spree and I

have a tissue off the pile on the table before anyone can say viral infection. I'm careful that our skin doesn't make contact as I pass it over.

Jacob fusses over our small family unit at the table. When he finally stands still, I realised he is all elbows and knees. His hair had been distracting me into thinking him attractive. That and the fact he doesn't know me. Those knees are bony, poking my shoulder when the train lurches. Gramps looks at me and pats the seat next to him. I keep my bag firmly where it is – blocking the seat next to the window – and don't move.

The bottle of water which Jacob brought back with the napkins keeps falling over on the table and rolling around. Four times so far. Jacob infects everything he touches with an imbalance. He also brought biscuits, from the depths of his pockets as, in his words, a *peace offering*. He smiles at me with guilt in his eyes: a look I am all too familiar with.

The empty packets and the crumbs from their corners are scattered in a pile in front of Gramps. He tears into them with evident pleasure, leaving none for Jacob and me.

Once we have cleaned as much as can be cleaned, this stranger, Jacob, points out the disabled toilet at the far end of the carriage. 'Do you have a change of clean clothes in your luggage?' He suggests my grandfather may wish to use the facilities to change.

I am uncertain how to answer, but Gramps steps in to the breach. 'I have no luggage, young man.'

'You're not going far then?' Jacob directs his question at me and I can catch the half-forgotten brogue in his voice. *Midlothian originally*, I think. *Lives out of the country*

*now*. I wonder if he is going to offer us money for dry cleaning, or if I ought to suggest it myself.

Gramps answers him, his deafness in response to questions temporarily on hold. 'It was stolen. They took it all.' He's off, nattering away about books again. Jacob stands there, confused, until someone and their child comes walking down the corridor. He has to sit or leave. Gramps pauses his monologue to pat the seat next to him, again.

Jacob sits then stands up once more in order to put his jacket and the laptop bag on the shelf above the seats. Not much space on those bony knees to balance a bag. I notice that he is trying to keep a physical distance from the old man who, though he doesn't smell, looks as though he ought to. There is something dirty about him, like a layer of grease left on the air he moves through.

While Gramps blethers away by himself, I try to catch Jacob's eye. When I finally do so, all I receive is a terse little grimace that could be either complicity or disgust or something completely different. Our knees knock under the table and I catch my breath, not wanting to move one way or the other. Jacob appears indifferent. He stretches one leg out into the aisle and I think *someone's going to trip over you* but I don't say it out loud because Gramps is still talking.

'Have you reported your luggage being stolen?' Jacob asks, interrupting the old man's narrative flow. 'I've always been terrified that'd happen to me.'

Gramps peers at him and says nothing.

'It's complicated,' I say. I hope my small smile is not inappropriately inviting. I hope it isn't too cold. The adrenaline streams under my skin again and I think *You could*



*be The One*. My mind starts running data sets. This time, this place, this man. The probability of being happy again. A new theory to research.

‘Did you have insurance?’ Jacob asks the old man, setting him off on a rant over the cost of books. I rest back into the rambling monotone and try to work out if my mother’s hair will turn that dirty, peppered colour in another decade.

The fields outside are clicking by and I realise that Gramps is now griping about the lack of biscuits right here, right now, rather than the lack of sustenance in his little dream world. He seems to have forgotten his earlier flush of gratitude. In honesty, he is whining.

This is my opportunity to regain the upper hand after Jacob’s earlier provision of biscuit bounty. I offer to fetch supplies. There’s my lunch still to eat, but I feel it would be dishonest in some way to eat unless the others are, at the least, having a cup of something. Seven to one, at least one of them also has packed sandwiches and feels the same way. Sooner or later one of us will break.

Neither of the men answer me directly. Gramps repeats that he is hungry.

‘I didn’t catch your name,’ Jacob smiles and while I’m staring, the stretch of his lips becomes a little fixed.

I realise I should be answering him. ‘Leah. You can call me Leah.’ My cheeks wobble as I try to hold my smile as confidently as he does. I tell myself to hold his eye as well, but that is the step too far.

‘Saint Lea. Renounced painting her face and adorning her head with shining pearls,’ it sounds as if he’s quoting. He does look a little like Mark when he’s pleased with himself.

I touch my cheek and wish I’d worn make-up today. ‘Actually, it’s L-E-A-H,’ I feel so pedantic, spelling out each letter. The rules of these games elude me. I try again, remembering what the magazines say. I play with my hair, wondering if I look suitably coquettish. ‘I deceived you into marrying me rather than my sister.’

Jacob looks startled rather than enchanted.

‘The Good Book.’ When Gramps speaks I hate him. Old tramps are not an aphrodisiac. He points at Jacob. ‘Thief of your brother’s birthright,’ He swings his finger round to point at me. ‘Thief of your sister’s lover,’ he shakes his head, curling both hands up in front of his chest like crab claws. ‘No bread left to break, no wine to wash away our sins.’

Taking this as another hint that he is hungry, I announce that I’m going to the buffet car. I hesitate over taking my wallet with me or my whole bag. I lift the coffee-damp pile of marking across onto the window seat, and make certain my iPod and sundry scattered items are scooped into the bag at the same time. I push my hand around the bottom of my bag for a moment as if I’m hunting for my wallet. I pick up my coat and check both pockets. Then I give a little sigh, and twist up half my mouth and both my eyebrows and shrug the whole bag up onto my shoulder. ‘Can’t ever find what I need in this thing,’ I say, looking towards the end of the carriage, towards the buffet car. That’s enough to make me feel like they think I only happen to be taking my handbag with me,

that I've covered up being an untrusting bitch. I drop my coat back on top of the marking, making a point to my small audience. *I'm just leaving all my stuff here. Only taking my bag. See how open I am towards the possibility that you're not going to run away with all my valuables. My valuable pile of essays, my valuable old coat.*

Jacob stands up as I steady myself in the aisle. 'I'll join you,' he says. I catch him patting his pockets, locating phone and wallet I assume.

I tell him I'm fine, ask what he'd like to drink.

'I have to go that way to the toilet.' He's clearly embarrassed I've made him spell it out.

Gramps stares at the empty biscuit packet he is folding between his fingers. I step backward to let Jacob out and he glances up at his jacket and laptop bag, then starts his half-running stride up the aisle.

I wonder out loud if he's running to or from something.

Gramps looks at me, briefly and blankly, then goes back to his rustling origami.

I leave him, then a few steps later I twist round and call back to him over my shoulder. 'I'll be back in a few minutes.'

The old man makes no acknowledgement that I've spoken.

When Jacob joins me, I'm standing in the queue and thinking about how I'll never have to talk to the Frequentist posse from Glasgow ever again. I tell him no, you're not disturbing me at all, and shuffle to the side to make room.

'I thought I could help you carry stuff.'

I know he is really saying *I didn't want to sit alone with that strange old man*. We move forward a couple of spaces in the queue. It smells like salt and vinegar crisps and spilt beer, a bit like my local. My old local. I don't have places any more. I wonder where Jacob goes drinking, if he goes alone or with a girlfriend, if he has a wife. Bare fingers, no rings, but that doesn't mean so much these days.

Jacob agrees that tea is better for one than coffee. He says he can't wake up in the morning without an Earl Grey and a cigarette. Then he looks ashamed and tells me he gave up smoking a while back, but has trouble remembering. I think that's sweet but I don't say so. I want to say *so, you gave up when you had kids?* but I don't.

*At this rate, he's never going to ask for my number.* It's a jolt to catch myself thinking that, like a stupid teenage girl. I don't have a future, so we cannot have one together. The fantasy persists for a moment, nonetheless. He probably knows all about wine and cooks a few dishes very well. I'd get back from the office and he'd be there in our spotlessly clean kitchen. I can picture him wearing an apron. And yes, that's the sound of our children upstairs, resisting being put to bed. I go up to say good night. I come down and he asks *is linguine acceptable, darling?* and I say *oh, yes, of course, darling, so long as it's fresh* and we laugh together. Then he says *your mother called earlier* and that's where the fantasy breaks.

Watching Jacob patting his pockets, I think perhaps he is checking for a lighter. Surreptitiously, I try to smell his breath, his hair, his jumper. It's hard to do without him noticing. Every time he turns his head to look back over in the direction of our seats – and he does that a lot, like a nervous tic – I lean in a little and inhale. I can't smell

anything beyond skin, but his nerviness leaves me with the suspicion that he has just had a sneaky fag in the toilet.

I tell him I don't smoke but that my mother used to.

He nods rapidly in little uneven ducks and dips, and looks back towards our seats again. I'm angry with myself that I can't make it through a little small talk without bringing my mother up. I've promised the doctor so many times, but old habits die hard.

'Is your grandfather alright being left alone?' he asks. 'Do you want me to check on him?'

I tell him he's fine.

Jacob says that my grandfather seemed a bit confused, and gives me a sideways look.

I'm guessing he's checking my reaction, checking for offence, before travelling further down the road of *is your grandfather insane or eccentric?* I take the opportunity, away from the old man's complicit silence, to draw a line.

'Not your grandfather?' Jacob is clearly surprised. I try unsuccessfully to think of a polite way of saying *not your business either*. Perhaps this is not a situation which calls for politeness. Jacob seems to think he is owed some kind of explanation. I can hear the person at the front of the queue being upset at the choice of fruit juice cartons in stock. I wonder if they serve Earl Grey tea and if to order it would be a bit too obvious that I'm hoping to impress, if it would come across as trying too hard.

'Are you his carer?'

I shake my head. Then stop. No and yes, depending on how one approaches the concept of care.

‘Is he a blood relative, then, or a distant relative? We always called my parents’ friends aunty so-and-so and uncle so-and-so.’ He pauses to consider. ‘Mainly uncle so-and-so.’ He seems struck by this. Not struck enough to let it drop.

‘No.’

He is definitely waiting for me to elaborate. This is some of the worst small talk I’ve ever had, and I’ve had a lot of awkward encounters. Blind dates. Set-ups. Rooms of grimacing people, wearing name-tags. ‘So, you’re friends?’

There’s an emphasis on the word *friends* that has a disavowal springing out before I can help it. ‘I don’t have grandparents,’ I say. ‘Not anymore. Not yet.’

Over the years, my mother has told me several variations on the story of how she got where she got, how I got where I got, and the various people who either helped or hindered along the way. I distil them all for Jacob in order to fill the time it takes to shuffle along the queue.

He interrupts me a lot, and suggests that we order the old man a panini.

The woman behind us in the queue sighs and I wonder why there are so many people wanting to slurp and munch all the way down south and where they’ve all come from, given that our carriage is practically empty. I explain to Jacob how my postdoc work used my mother’s adoption experience as an example of how isolated incidents – persons – can effect reciprocal changes in their social network experiences despite not

knowing they exist in relation to each other. I tell him there was a chance my work would be taken up by the econometrics people.

‘Stock markets?’ he asks.

‘It’s about policing the effect of juxtaposition: two unrelated objects interacting without intention.’

He tells me it really does sound fascinating, and starts telling me about his work as a librarian.

I look around and see that the panini machine has only just been switched on and the buffet girl is picking at her nail varnish. I also see a corner stand of novels and magazines. It has five copies of the Kitty Patterson book. Someone picks one up and leafs through it while they are waiting. They break the spine in the process. That puts an ugly slant on my thoughts.

My mother’s adoption was – she has always said – the most traumatic experience in the world. Her idea of rebelling against her own suffering was to, in her own words, smother me with love. This mainly consisted of telling me that other people didn’t love me. I don’t have any clear memory if she was like that before my dad died.

The family who adopted my mother are no longer part of her life. Since she decided that, I’ve had to accept that they’re not a part of mine either. We saw them on special visits, until my mother’s adoptive parents died. My mother always told me they weren’t worth the effort. I used to get Christmas presents from some of them, I think. There was always a stash under the tree with the labels ripped off. I loved those presents best because they didn’t entail writing thank you letters.

Disowned by one side of the family and disowning the other, I passed through puberty without knowing if my long toes came from my Dad, or if the curl in my hair was the same as a maternal relative's. My short-toed, straight-haired mother did not welcome those kind of questions. Amongst the papers we burnt after my dad died were all of the photographs.

‘Social networking sites are to blame for my current problems,’ I say.

Jacob laughs, which is precisely what I hoped for.

I fold my arms on the buffet counter top, and watch the catering assistant struggle with counting change. I want – suddenly, desperately – to tell this stranger that I am about to vanish. I want to share all my secrets with him. With someone. With everyone on this train. I want him to ask me to stay in my present and to contemplate a future as myself.

We place our order. Jacob is definitely older than I am but he doesn't like taking the lead. I choose his panini for him. I tell the catering assistant that we don't mind the wait and I put my hand on Jacob's arm to pull him to stand to one side with me. I find myself tugging him impatiently rather than guiding him in the elegant fashion I had envisaged.

‘Then, of course, the internet in general could be said to be an unstoppable intrusion on our right to the privacy of isolation and individuality.’ I'm leaning as I speak, and my elbow slips a little on the plastic counter. I don't fall over so much as jig on the spot. My cheeks burn up and I think I hear someone in the queue laugh.

‘What happened?’ Jacob asks.



I'm not certain if he means now or then. The latter is less humiliating to focus on. 'When my mother turned eighteen, she wrote to her biological parents. She wrote again every year, on her birthday. Her biological mother returned the one-sided correspondence some point in my mother's mid-twenties, with a short note requesting that Marilyn cease writing. My mother burnt the note and her own letters the day she became engaged to my dad.

'If she'd known she had brothers and sisters, perhaps my mother would have persisted. She always wanted a large family, but they only had me. There were complications. I've never asked for details.

'Thanks to my students, I joined Facebook. It's the easiest way of keeping tabs on my students. It's not cyberstalking if it's strictly professional. My mother joined too, to keep tabs on me.

'Christmas Eve just past, my mother's mother—'

Before I can finish my sentence, Jacob interrupts me. 'You have a problem with your mum sticking her nose in every little thing you're doing, thinking she has some kind of a right?' Jacob stirs the extra cream and sugars into Gramps' coffee. I count the empty packets and containers. Three creams and six sugars.

'Actually, I have a problem with people not taking internet security seriously. I had a grand stolen from my bank account once through identity theft and – '

'My mum barely knows what a computer is.' Jacob is clearly under the impression that we are bonding over our irritating mothers. I hate him now, for making

me tell this story out loud, for making it part of my reality again. He can take his Earl Grey and his lovely hair and stick them.

‘Anyway. On Christmas Eve, she dies. That is, my mother’s mother dies. In hospital, long illness, etcetera. Everyone goes round her house on Christmas day, all her *family*, because it’s the only one with an oven big enough to fit the turkey in. An impromptu wake.

‘Because they’re all there together, they decide to make a start on going through her personal papers. Hogs at a trough. They find my mother’s birth certificate. They find photocopies of the letters my mother wrote.

‘I knew my mother hadn’t been listening to my advice over privacy settings: it only took them eight minutes to track her down via Facebook.

‘They called my mother on Christmas Day – when I was there – and they tell her they want her back. That she needs to be part of *their* family. That she doesn’t need to be alone any more.’ Now we are waiting for the napkin dispenser to be refilled. My eyes are hot and prickling. Jacob keeps picking his cup of hot chocolate up and putting it down directly, without even pretending to sip it. He is listening, but his eyes slide back towards our carriage. If I looked down, I would expect to see his foot tapping. He passes me my change and his hands are cold.

‘To cut a long story short, I’m heading down to London to support my mother. She’s meeting her *family* for the first time this evening.’

‘You’re excited about meeting your relatives?’

‘They’re her project. I’m just there for moral support.’

‘That’s sweet. Relatives can be tough. I’m dreading my boyfriend meeting my parents.’ Then our paninis are ready, cutting short further questions.

It isn’t until we’re stepping back through the swaying corridor that Jacob speaks again. He tucks his hot chocolate into the crook of his arm, and hangs the brown paper panini bag from his fingers. He uses his free hand to close the swaying toilet door. It reeks. ‘Your grandfather or, rather, the man I thought was your grandfather. How is he connected to you then? Is he one of your mother’s mysterious relatives?’

‘Nothing to do with me at all. I only met him on the train, about a half hour or so before you joined us.’ Once it’s out, I don’t understand how I could possibly have thought it such a difficult thing to articulate. Nothing easier. An object in isolation.

I hope I misheard him.

We step into our carriage and Gramps is nowhere to be seen.

It’s a good few minutes now since we sat down and the atmosphere is increasingly awkward. The old man’s coffee-stained jacket is still drying on the back of the seat across the aisle from me. My coat is still draped over the pile of marking. I really should get on with that. Perhaps I can use it as an excuse for not talking.

‘I expect he’s in the toilet.’ Jacob repeats himself.

‘He knew you went up that way with me to use the toilet, so he’ll be in the one in the other carriage,’ I add, helping along the little fantasy that we’re comfortable with this

situation. In my head I start trying to work out the actual probabilities and wonder if it would be rude to ask Jacob to pass me a napkin so I can jot down some of the fractionals.

‘Most likely, he only left just before we got back.’

‘Older people take a long time to, um, pass water.’ We lapse back into silence. I try to avoid contemplating prostates. Jacob starts laying out the napkins, paper cups and paninis as if laying the table for a family meal.

‘Really never met before today?’ Jacob’s question is directed out the window and only half-spoken. I assume it is intended to be rhetorical. The tannoy system crackles back in, telling us we’re due at Peterborough shortly.

I sip at my tea. It’s too hot. I take the plastic top off, and blow on it instead. Jacob looks out the window rather than catch my eye.

‘Perhaps you should check he’s okay.’

I open my mouth to remind Jacob that the old man isn’t my responsibility. I exhale over my tea instead, counting to ten in the steam. ‘Fine.’

When I stand up, I don’t pretend to consider leaving my bag. I put it on top of the table by my tea while I struggle out into the aisle, then hoist it over my shoulder. For here I can see that the shelf above our seats is empty. Specifically, it’s empty of the jacket and laptop bag which I remember Jacob stashing there.

Jacob sees me looking. He jumps, and hits his knees against the table. I jump to stop my tea from slopping, with limited success. Jacob gets dripped on as he untangles himself into the aisle. *Tit for tat* I think.

He reaches those long arms up onto the overhead shelf, and pats around desperately as though his belongings are present but not visible. I pretend to be looking around in case they've been moved along, or hidden under a seat, I don't want to get pulled into this: Jacob is a stranger to me again, he's picking up other peoples' coats and putting them back again, folding them neatly in an abstracted way. I pick up the sandwiches and shuffle the cups round the table, as if the laptop might have shrunk like Alice in Wonderland and hidden amongst the discarded cellophane.

I find nothing. Jacob finds nothing. We shrug at each other and I try not to smile. 'Was it just your laptop up there?'

He reminds me about the jacket and tells me it was Hugo Boss.

I grimace, unsure if that means he doesn't mind about losing it so much or if it makes it worse.

He nods faster in agreement, taking it I understand completely. He begins asking the other passengers if they saw anything and they all say no, they were sleeping. They were reading. They were staring out the window. This is their stop. Or they don't answer at all.

I look over my shoulder at the two or three people behind me in the carriage and they avoid my eye. As when freefalling in a dream, feet pushing down through empty space. Straight after the top of the rollercoaster, as you plummet. A lift that's moving too fast for comfort. My stomach begins to drop and I tell myself it's just hunger that makes me feel this way and I should eat.

'Why did you tell me he was your grandfather?' Jacob gives me a hot-faced glare.

This whole situation is boring; I am going to walk away from it. 'I told you he was nothing to do with me.'

'What were you doing?' he asks.

I wait for him to elaborate.

He doesn't.

I know that eating right now would show a lack of consideration, but my stomach hurts a little from lack of sustenance and those paninis are getting cold. Testing the waters, I move to sit back down.

Jacob moves into my personal space, blocking me from my seat. 'What were you doing, delaying me like that?'

It was his idea to get hot food. I don't feel like pointing that out. 'I'm hungry.'  
Honesty is the best policy.

'Do you think I'm stupid?' Honesty is no longer the best policy.

'Do you think he took your possessions?'

'Do you honestly expect me to believe you had nothing to do with this?'

'To do with what?'

Jacob's right eye drops a tear. He sees me pitying him, and spits down by my feet.  
I've not been spat at before.

'Fuck you.'

He takes a step back.

'Go tell someone who cares.'

'Accomplice bitch.' Nice insult. 'I'm calling the police.'

‘Call them.’

His hand twitches towards his trouser pocket, and away again. He looks up at the empty shelf, and down at his empty hand.

It doesn’t take my doctorate to put two and two together and work out where his phone is. I wonder what else he has lost. ‘Want to use my phone?’ The train pulls in to York. Jacob and I both turn to look out the window, where a mass of people are milling around on the platform outside. I can see the certainty draining out of his face, along with the hope.

‘My bag,’ he says, his voice a whisper. Then he repeats it louder, looking back at me as if expecting help.

I shrug.

Still swearing audibly, Jacob roots through the luggage rack in the next carriage along. I can see him through the trap of the dirty Perspex doors as they open and close automatically. He must be standing by the sensor and for a fleeting moment I worry that he will trap an over-extended elbow. I add the items up in my head. *Luggage. Jacket. Wallet. Phone. Laptop bag.* I wonder what the variables are between sentimental value and financial and make a mental note to add in effort spent acquiring the object, versus effort spent acquiring the money to pay for it. Then I remember I’m never going back to the department and I sigh loud enough to make the man who just sat down across the aisle swivel his head round and stare.

There's the bang of the last doors. There's the whistle. Wait for it – the subtle chug of the floor – and the train starts pulling away from the platform. I'm still slant, with my hip digging into the table and sore knees from neither standing nor sitting, ready to show willing, if I can ever work out what is needed. The Perspex door shuts again, blocking the crouching figure of Jacob from my sight.

Gathering the knocked-about pile of coffee stained marking together into a neater pile, I count to ten. I decide to move back to my original seat – pretend this whole incident never happened – and eat my chicken salad sandwiches. One of the paninis is leaking grease through the wrappings. The Kitty Patterson paperback is still on the table: I slip it under the marking and into my bag.

The train is slow. Out of the window, I can see the old man. He has a cherry-red suitcase by his feet, and his face is different. He's smiling. He waves at me. That might be a laptop case over his shoulder. That might be a jacket over his arm. It might not.

I wave back.

After they threatened to look at the CCTV and I refuse to give them my full name or address – and actually tell them to *go ahead and make my day* – Jacob and the Ticket Inspector leave my carriage. My head hurts and I feel dizzy. I eat my sandwiches slowly, drink plenty of water and breath deeply and evenly.

I stare at the back of the seat in front of me but I know everyone else in the carriage is still glancing over and whispering. One outstanding conviction – anything at all like that on my blemish-free criminal record – and my application to The Agency will



be disqualified: *we're not here for criminals, we're here for good people in bad situations; we're a choice, not a last resort.*

Food in my stomach helps settle me down. There's only a couple of hours until I reach London. Everything is going to plan.

The essay on the top of the pile in front of me is more badly stained by coffee than I'd first thought. I pick apart the page and one of them rips, wetly, across a main working.

Shit.

Destruction of university property is technically a criminal offence. I put the ripped page to one side to dry out.

When I try to write a mark on the next essay in the pile my fountain pen doesn't work. I scribble in the margin, trying to get the ink to flow and then the train jerks and the pen flies across the page, leaving a dark splash.

Two down. Blotting the ink with a tissue simply makes it worse.

Without giving the consequences much thought, I rip the inky page in half. Then in quarters. Then I destroy the rest of the essay.

The coffee-stained essay I simply ball up, mulching the wet pages in with the dry ones.

Essay three I briefly turn into an origami crane, scoring the folded pages with my thumb nail. Then I pull the crane's head off.

I do all this as quietly as possible, keeping my movements small and precise, trying not to attract undue attention.

When there are no essays left on the table in front of me and there is a large pile of torn and balled paper on the seat next to me, my headache is completely gone and I'm humming a carol under my breath.

I sit and enjoy the feeling of calm which washes over me. My shoulders feel lighter than they have in weeks. After a few minutes I decide to tidy up.

The bin in the carriage is already overflowing. I try to wedge a handful of shreds and tatters of paper in, but the paper falls straight back out. The university crest is clearly visible, as is half of a student identification number. I pick each scrap off the floor and go back to my seat.

Checking through the pile next to me, I'm surprised at how easy it is to piece the paper back together. My name is repeated over and over; sometimes ripped through, sometimes complete. Individual student details are equally easy to pick out. I note that several of them got question seven laughably wrong.

The ticket inspector's nasal voice cuts into my thoughts. Looking over my shoulder, I can see him moving up the carriage towards me.

My hands shake as I scrape the torn strips of paper into my shoulder bag. I hold the bag on my knees and pretend to look out the window.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end as he walks past. He comes back. He tells me to clear up before I get off the train. He tells me he's watching me.

There is no further sign of the weeping, shaking Jacob whose boyfriend – incidentally – is welcome to him.

When the ticket inspector moves on again, I look down: the shreds of paper have spilt out of my bag and are scattered on the floor around my seat and out into the aisle. I pick up every single piece. The essays are beyond fixing. There is no way I can dispose of this mess before meeting my mother; no bins at King's Cross. I can't risk leaving it on this train; that bastard is just looking for an excuse to detain me. The window next to me is inoperable.

At first I flush only small handfuls at a time. The scraps of paper in my bag seems to be multiplying. I pick them off the static of my trousers.

Someone knocks on the door.

I put two handfuls down the toilet and flush. I put three handfuls down and flush. I call through that I'm being sick and hear muttering. I flush another three handfuls and fake the noise of explosive vomiting.

Four handfuls blocks the toilet beyond repair. I empty my water bottle and attempt to flush again, but wetting the paper just makes it worse. The toilet bin is as full as the rubbish bin in the carriage. I make a mental note to complain to the authorities about the sanitation provision. I can't hear anyone outside the toilet door. When I risk it and undo the lock, the vestibule is empty.

The window over the door pulls down halfway and the cold air hitting my face almost makes me vomit for real.

The first handful of paper flies straight back in, covering me like confetti. I swear under my breath.

Next time, I hold my hand properly outside, curving round the side of the train itself before letting go a little at a time. The scraps of paper whip out of my hand in tiny, damp clumps. The thump of the air pushing past makes my hand rattle against the metal side of the train. When I pull my hand back in, it is covered in dark smudges. Soon, my bag is empty. I pick the final strips out of my hair and let them go. A couple of people walk past, but nobody says anything.

It is difficult to push the window back up because my hands are so cold. Picking the last of the scraps off the floor of the corridor is disgusting: they're wet with what I can only hope is mud. I go back into the toilet cubicle and drop the final, muddy pieces in the toilet bowl. Then I drop wedges of toilet paper in the toilet bowl until I can't see any of the original blockage.

I wash my hands until the liquid soap dispenser runs empty.

Back in my seat, I rub my hands together but my nails stay purple. I sit on them until the pins and needles start up, indicating increased circulation.

I keep seeing scraps of paper out of the corners of my eyes, but on closer inspection there's never anything there.

Item by item, I take everything out of my shoulder bag and check for stray scraps. I find one, stuck to my wallet. I shred it until each piece is too small to be ripped again. I

put the small, fluffy handful in my mouth and chew it. It tastes like water left in a glass for several days. I swallow without choking.

Still hissing and missing out the odd word, the tannoy system announces that we will soon be arriving in King's Cross. I zip up my bag and stand awkwardly half by the seat, half in the aisle, waiting for the other passengers to move out of my way.

In the window a few seats back along from mine, I can see something white fluttering. I try to ignore it.

The train sighs to a halt. People start moving forward. I can't resist checking; I take a few steps along the aisle, then pretend I've forgotten something and squeeze past a fat man, muttering apologies as I move back along the carriage.

Stuck to the outside of the window is a strip, clearly recognisable – to my expert eyes – as being from one of the university cover sheets.

I get off the train and pick it off, screwing it up and dropping it down on the tracks.

In the near distance, the other side of the ticket barriers, my mother is waiting. My stomach drops again but I think *three days* and keep going.

# 2

## **Jacob's Other Stories**

## **fugue, n.**

**Pronunciation:** /fju:g/

**1. 'A polyphonic composition constructed on one or more short subjects or themes, which are harmonized according to the laws of counterpoint, and introduced from time to time with various contrapuntal devices' (Stainer and Barrett). double fugue (see quot. 1880).**

**2. Psychiatry. A flight from one's own identity, often involving travel to some unconsciously desired locality. It is a dissociative reaction to shock or emotional stress in a neurotic, during which all awareness of personal identity is lost though the person's outward behaviour may appear rational. On recovery, memory of events during the state is totally repressed but may become conscious under hypnosis or psycho-analysis. A fugue may also be part of an epileptic or hysterical seizure. Also attrib., as fugue state.**

Oxford English Dictionary

### **It must be Fête**

Bending over the cash box – pretending to count the float – I inhale the sharp, tin scent of well-handled small change and lick my lips.

‘Jacob? Is that what you’re planning to wear this afternoon? How rustic.’

I straighten my back, sifting coppers through my fingers and forcing a smile. ‘I’ve been prepping the charcoal burners, Ceci.’

‘I’m sure you have. Well done, keep up the good work.’ She wanders on to the next stall, loudly declaring how delightful it is to see the fine tradition of whack-a-rat being kept up. I walk out of earshot of her childhood reminiscences, wiping my hands on the cleanest patch left on my apron.

‘Isn’t this just scrummy!’ An unknown blonde woman accosts me with a piece of Victoria sponge.

I flinch away.

‘Don’t you just love a good fête?’

I nod, smile and don’t disagree out loud. Behind the marquee I find a shady patch to lie down and shut my eyes. My arms are aching from unusual exertion and more than anything I want to go home, take a shower and sleep. The weeks of planning have left an emptiness in me which the promise of the day is so far failing to fill.

My mobile rings. It’s Larry demanding to know the postcode for the sat-nav.

‘It doesn’t have a postcode. It’s a field.’

‘Bollocks. There aren’t any fields in London.’



I promise I'll ask someone and he demands I call him back immediately.

Standing up takes more effort than I think it merits. I tell Larry he was meant to be here half an hour ago anyway.

'If I'm doing a gig for free, I'll turn up when I like.'

'It's for charity, not for free.'

He says he probably isn't far now.

Over by the entrance, members of staff are starting to trickle in early. There aren't many occasions in our social calendar where we get to suck up to all the Board members at the same time as showing off how pretty our families are and what fine, upstanding people we try to be in our spare time. Mandy – one of the nicer shelf-stackers at our library – is explaining in a practised chant what the entrance fee entitles them to. 'It's a fiver, yeah, and it's a donation but we give you a ticket for the tombola and you can win stuff. Nah, it's a fiver each for adults, half-price for kids under ten. Nah, food is extra this year, there was a memo sent round.'

Mandy catches me watching her and beckons. I keep my distance in case she wants help, then I spot Larry's Audi pulls up to the edge of the yellowing parking green and jog slowly over, my legs feeling like they're about to drop off.

'What is this bollocks anyway?'

'I told you before. It's a charity fundraiser.'

'It's a bunch of tossers in a field. Is it the WI?' He grunts as I help him lift a large black case out of his boot. 'Do I at least get a changing room?'

‘Is the rabbit in here? I’ve cordoned off part of one of the catering marquees for you.’

‘Tell me there won’t be any kids.’

‘I can’t lie to you, Larry. There will be kids.’

He flops his arms around theatrically, fake-sobbing loud enough to make a nearby group of girls in straw hats stare at us. ‘Effing hate kids, you know that.’

‘You’re a magician. You’re meant to love them. Just not in a creepy way.’ We start walking to the tents. I carry the bag and he links his arm through mine companionably, carrying nothing but a folded black cloth I assume is a cloak.

‘I’m an adult magician, mate. I do hen parties normally.’

‘Whatever. You’re a free magician and you’re here to make me look good.’ I show him to his impromptu backstage and promise to save him a burger.

The crowds are starting to thicken but there aren’t enough people to stop Ceci from spotting me and summoning me over to meet someone standing in the shade of a tree.

I brace myself and obey.

‘This is Marcia from the St. Lawrence Trust. Marcia, this is one of our display staff from the library. He’s in charge of today.’ Marcia is a thin, brown, nervous bird of a lady.

She asks me if I’d like to meet some of the children.

I lie through my teeth, telling her I’d love to.

‘Does them good, having a run around somewhere green for a change.’

‘I hope we raise a lot of money for them.’

‘Money isn’t everything, young man.’ We walk and talk over to an impromptu football pitch and watch a handful of children of assorted ages run in circles round a ball. A priest blows a whistle and runs after them, stopping every so often to put his hands on his thighs and cough. Maria lectures me on the importance of love and acceptance until the skin on my cheeks is stretched so tightly into a fake smile of interest that I think my face is going to snap off and I have to make my excuses and leave.

I wash my hands and arms with carbolic soap in the trough-like sink behind the barbeque. I take the filthy apron off and try to brush as much in the way of grass stalks off my jeans as I can, then I wash my hands again and my face and slick my hair down. In my head I’m running through stalls and rough estimates of people and trying to tally the costs. I think it’s going to cover it. Then a young man with the unblemished face and golden hair of an angel taps me on the shoulder and I jump and almost knock over the folding table covered in condiments.

‘Are you Jacob?’

For him, I would be anyone. I stare at his biceps.

‘I’ve been sent to report for duty.’ The angel shifts from foot to foot and just as I’m about to say something he smiles and I all I can think of is the French phrase, *coup de foudre*, which means thunderbolt but also means love at first sight and I know exactly why because something has knocked all the breath out of me.

Mandy winks at me behind the angel's back when I explain that he will be helping her on the ticket desk. I wink back and ask how the takings are.

'We're raking it in,' she says. 'Those kids are going to get more books than we've got in the library.'

'Is that why you give the profits to the St. Lawrence Trust?' asks the angel, fussing with a spare fold-out chair. 'Because of the book connection?'

'He's the patron saint of librarians, so we thought it appropriate,' I say. 'I call this thing the annual cooking of the books.'

Mandy winces, but the angel tips his head back and laughs. He has perfect teeth.

'Don't you need to check on the barbeque?' says Mandy.

I agree and walk away slowly, checking back over my shoulder. She's bending over his shoulder, showing him how the ticket system works. Her top is – in my opinion – inappropriately low-cut for a work event.

Larry is working his way along the queue for burgers, asking the punters to pick a card, any card. Ceci strides over to me and stands watching him.

'He's good, isn't he?' I say.

'He'd better be, for what we're paying him.' She curls her lip. 'Card tricks aren't quite what I expected.'

There's a whoop from the queue as Larry reaches over, pulls a sausage out of a child's ear and eats it.

I smile at Ceci. 'He's worth every penny. Trust me.' Larry starts to pull a string of raw sausages out of someone's cleavage and I cross my fingers in my pocket and hope he remembers it's a family-friendly occasion.

Skipping the queue, I steal two burgers and return to the ticket desk. 'You've been here for ages.' I say to Mandy, handing her one of the burgers. 'Take a break.'

'Is that for me?' asks the angel. 'I'm a vegetarian.'

'It's for the magician,' I say. 'Mandy's about to take it over to him.'

Mandy gives me a dirty look and takes a bite of her burger.

'You've got sauce on your chin.' I tell her.

She rearranges her top and leaves.

'Everything going according to plan?' The angel leans back in his chair, running his fingers through the tousled gold of his hair. 'Do you always organise this?'

'So far so good. I'm up for promotion so I volunteered to help out. I didn't catch your name by the way.'

'Benedict.'

'Patron saint of students,' I open and close the cash box, trying to gauge the thickness of the pile of banknotes. 'Are you a student, Benedict?'

'Dropped out last semester. I'm thinking of going back to do foundation photography next year. What about Mandy?'

'Patron saint of brewers and vintners. Very appropriate in her case, you should see her after work on a Friday night. Mess doesn't cover it.' In the distance I can see Ceci rounding people up for the jam judging. I point her out to Benedict. 'That's Cecelia

Mountford. Lady Mountford. Allegedly patron saint of music but actually patron saint of being a bitch.'

'Who's a bitch?' Mandy comes back holding two plastic cups of lemonade. 'You look hot, Benedict. Drink this. Cheers for helping out, Jacob. Don't let us keep you.'

I can't think of an excuse to stay.

Five hours later, the numbers are beginning to add up. I can pay off the Visa entirely and this quarter's interest on the online account and still have enough left over for the deposit on the new flat.

'What's that?' Larry drops his chin down on my shoulder and I pull a biscuit tin over the paper in front of me.

'Accounts for the fête. I'm checking the budget balances. You're covered in sweat. That's disgusting.' I shrug him off.

'What budget? Enough in there to buy me an effing drink to say thank you?' Larry wanders into the corner of the tent and begins to get changed out of his costume.

'It's for charity, remember. Books for deprived kids.'

'Depraved kids, more like. One of those little tossers tried to nick my wand.'

I fold the sheet of paper into my pocket and pick up the cashbox. 'I'm off. See you later on.'

Larry finishes pulling a t-shirt over his head and raises a hand in salute.

I walk out, then duck back inside. 'Thanks, by the way. You were great.'

'Any chance of a hand lugging this back to the car.'

‘Sorry, got to say goodbye to the dignitaries.’

He gives me the finger.

By the time I’ve done a full circuit of the field, all three marquees have been dismantled. I find Mandy eating leftover burger buns; her ample cleavage is covered in crumbs, which she picks off slowly while informing me that Benedict is helping his mother carry tables. ‘You’re too old for him, Jacob. How old are you anyway, forty two or forty three?’

‘I just wanted to thank him for helping out.’ *Forty four.*

‘Have you been thanking all the volunteers personally?’ I threaten to squirt ketchup on her skirt and she agrees to shut up.

Over by the vans, I am unable to avoid the stick-like figures of Ceci and Marcia. I hold up the cashbox and shake it. ‘We’ve done well today,’ I say. ‘Everyone seemed to enjoy themselves.’

‘How well?’ asks Ceci.

I tell her I’m waiting for a few invoices, so I don’t want to commit to a number. Marcia nods and witters, thanking us both for all our hard work. I spot Benedict through the outline of trees, drinking out of a bottle of water like someone in a advert.

‘Lovely to meet you, Marcia.’ I shake her thin, brown hand. ‘I’ll see you at the board meeting on Monday, Ceci.’ Ceci and I don’t shake hands. She gives me a limp smile and escorts Marcia towards the car park. I walk casually over to Benedict.

‘Long day,’ he passes me the water bottle. ‘I expect you’re going home to sleep now.’

‘I was up at six to buy the French bread.’ I put the cashbox down at my feet. ‘You up to much later?’

‘No real plans. Might meet some people later on.’ He stretches his arms above his head, exposing his navel and I have to stop myself staring. My throat goes dry. I drink some water.

‘I’m actually going out with some mates in Shoreditch. No rest for the wicked.’ I try to both disguise and imply an invitation. ‘One of them’s the magician, actually.’

‘Will he be bringing the rabbit?’ I laugh too loudly and then there’s an awkward silence.

‘Thanks for your help today. If you end up anywhere near Shoreditch let me know and I’ll buy you a drink to say thank you.’ It sounds so obvious, I dig my nails into the palm of my hand and pass the water back to him.

‘I’ll get your number from my mum,’ he says. I’m about to ask who exactly his mum is, when Larry strolls over. ‘Hey, loved your thing with the flowers.’

‘Cheers, mate. Jacob, you want a lift?’ I tell Larry I have some stuff to see to so I’ll just take the bus. ‘No worries, I don’t mind hanging around.’ He introduces himself to Benedict and the two of them loll down on the grass; I loom over them, tongue-tied.

There are two or three people directing the last of the cars out of the car park so I tell them they can go home. Ceci and Marcia still haven’t left and I discover that they’re



waiting for Marcia's daughter to finish herding children. They fan themselves with leaflets about organic vegetable boxes and discuss literacy rates in prison.

Once I run out of people to thank and things to pretend to be overseeing, I go back to Benedict and Larry. Larry is droning on about house prices and Benedict is lying on his back, chewing a grass stalk. 'All done, mate?'

'Just about. Can you keep an eye on this for me?' I put the cashbox down between Larry and Benedict. 'I'll be back in a moment.'

'Just give me long enough to pick the effing lock.' I pull a face while Benedict bares his perfect teeth in a laugh. 'How much did you make?'

'Hopefully enough to buy a lot of books for the kiddies.'

'Still can't believe you managed to persuade me to do this for free.'

'Are all your props in the car? If you leave anything behind I can't guarantee you'll get it back.'

'That's generous of you,' Benedict says to Larry. 'Giving up your weekend for nothing.'

'It's not just me. All of us were working *pro bono publico*. All for the kiddies.'

'I'll check you haven't left anything,' I leave on another circuit of the field, trying to think of new ways to ask Benedict for his number. As I walk back, I see that he and Larry have been joined by three other people, two of whom are recognisably stick-like.

Marcia and Ceci are still fanning themselves even though they're now in the shade. The large girl with them is, I assume, Marcia's daughter. Larry sees me approaching and picks up the cash-box. 'I'll see you at the car,' he says and carries it off.

‘All packed-up,’ I put on my fake cheery tone. ‘Is that you off now, Ceci?’

‘Benedict’s just told us the good news,’ says Marcia.

‘We’re delighted,’ says Ceci. ‘Quite the miracle worker, Jacob. I never would have thought you had it in you.’ I smile at them all and hope they’ll leave me alone with Benedict. Larry toots the car horn. ‘We’ve probably set a new record. The rest of the board will be very impressed.’

‘I don’t quite follow you,’ I say. ‘I think it’s about the same number of people as last year.’

‘Not attendance, Jacob. A new donation record. Because you brilliantly persuaded everyone to work for free. So the outgoing expenses will be very small. How modest of you to keep so quiet about it.’ Ceci bares her teeth at me. ‘I’m looking forward to your presentation of the budget. On Monday. I think it’s going to be very interesting.’ I smile back and murmur that I’m delighted to have done what I can. My stomach feels like I’ve swallowed Larry’s prop rabbit.

Marcia says goodbye again. Her daughter breaks off from smiling moonily at Benedict and says goodbye to me too. Benedict lifts a hand in a half wave to me. ‘Maybe catch you later,’ I say. Larry toots the car horn again and I ask Benedict if he needs a lift anywhere.

‘I’m going back with Mum.’ He tilts his head towards Cecelia.

### Take my advice-slip

The ATM screen is flashing at me. *Would you like an advice-slip with your cash?* I press the button for yes. This is the last withdrawal I can make for a while unless I want to slip back into my overdraft. I need the printed reminder that I'm broke. Heating bills are ever imminent and the coat I'm wearing wasn't cheap.

Benedict is an expensive habit. He never asks for anything but he never pays for anything and we either eat out or we order in. We like cocktails. We under-dress in over-priced clothes. He texts me in the morning to let me know if he's wearing the Armani or the Prada so we don't clash at dinner.

Beeping and spitting out my cash card, the ATM thanks me. I thank it back, under my breath. This money is going to buy me a whole lot of love.

I know his mother well; Ceci and I go way back. We've never pretended to like each other before and neither of us thought that me dating her son would do much to change that. He has strange ideas about us becoming one happy family. Ceci and I act nice when he's around, plastering on fake smiles like it's Max Factor day. When Benedict turns his back, the claws come out like flick knives. If he weren't so beautiful it would be handbags at dawn at fifty paces.

When Ceci found out Benedict and I were seeing each other, she sent me a note asking me round for tea. We ate cucumber sandwiches beside her croquet lawn and talked around the subject. The fat bees were out in full force, buzzing around our heads and

coated with pollen. She wore a slightly veiled sun-hat and a day-suit in cream lace; on the outside she's a very beautiful woman. I can't remember what I was wearing, except that the leather on my shoes was scuffed and I crossed my feet at the ankles and tucked them under the wrought-iron chair.

The housekeeper wore white cotton gloves, poured our drinks and took our empty plates. The subject of Benedict still hadn't been broached when Ceci mentioned that the sun was over the yardarm and I probably had other things to attend to. The housekeeper handed me my jacket in the hallway. I held Ceci's cold hand and kissed the air next to her cheeks. 'Such a pleasant afternoon, Jacob,' Ceci said, showing her teeth. 'I'll see you at the library fundraiser on Tuesday, of course.' I murmured that it would be a pleasure.

Halfway down the front steps, she caught up with me. 'You've forgotten this,' she pressed an unsealed envelope on me, visibly padded with bank notes.

'This isn't mine.' I held it away from my body.

'That is yours. My son is mine.' Ceci turned to go back inside. At the top of the steps she paused and looked back at me. 'I think that's all we need to say about the matter.'

I resisted the urge to count the contents and left the envelope in the post box at the end of her drive. It was a twenty minute walk to the nearest bus stop. The strip of sunburn on my T-zone didn't go down for a full week. At my age I can't afford that kind of skin damage.

Now the ATM is sputtering out my cash. It's hard to sort the notes into my wallet with these gloves on. I take them off and tuck them under my arm. I've never worn textures like these before. Winter is a whole different world with silk underwear and supple leather gloves. Merino wool scarf. Cashmere jumper. I can move my arms, even with five layers on. The outside world is no longer something to be struggled against.

Before encountering me, Benedict claims he had never slept on sheets without knowing the thread count and that Ikea sheets bring him out in a rash. He told me that the morning after our first night together. I examined every pale, toned inch of his body and couldn't find a single blemish. We went to Harrods together that afternoon. It was worth every pound if that's what brought him back the next night. And the next. I was so scared it was going to be just another one-night-stand. I would have bought a new sofa if he'd said he didn't particularly like the colour of the one I had.

I had been bored for a long time before I met Benedict. That's all he was at first, something to chase away the dust in certain corners of my life. He is breathtaking – magazine looks. My first Adonis. I drown looking at him. He is my lifebelt. When he leaves my side, I find it hard to breathe.

My friends dismissed Benedict as a mid-life crisis. Elliott explained it to me as kindly as he knew how. 'If you're over forty and the relationship doesn't involve discussing a mortgage it isn't a real relationship. He's a phase.' I told him he was jealous. He told me everyone was laughing at me behind my back. I told him to tell them to fuck off. He said that if I didn't accept that it was just a fling and move on to someone more

appropriate, he was going to tell Ceci what was going on between her son and me. I told him I was in love and he sighed and ordered another round of martinis.

Ceci's invitation to tea arrived two days later.

There's my advice-slip. I put it in my pocket without looking at it. I double-check I have my cash-card. Everything is in order. The group behind me in the queue are chattering loudly about birthday plans to go ice-skating at the weekend.

For my last birthday my three oldest and closest friends ganged up to buy me a present. Larry insisted on producing it via sleight of hand, pulling purple ribbons from behind my ear. I sat there and watched Elliott loudly protesting that none of us were impressed while Fiona bounced in her chair, clapping her hands and squealing. Then they were all unusually silent as I undid the pink ribbon around the square, brown cardboard box. Benedict was at college and I suspected them of having planned this for a time when he couldn't be present.

I took the lid off, and tilted the box from side to side to make the needle spin.

'It's an effing antique,' said Larry. 'Like you.'

'We thought that perhaps you could use some direction in your life,' said Fiona. She was on her feet by then, hiding behind Larry and Elliott.

I thanked them, politely. I didn't take the antique brass compass out of the foam padding. I put the lid back on and left the box on the table. My lack of excitement or appreciation at the gesture was palpable as I twisted the ribbon between my fingers. Elliott signalled for the waitress to bring the bill. Fiona said she had to dash back to work.

Larry said they'd give her a lift on their way home. I said I had other plans. On my way to meet Benedict that evening I remembered the leather jacket he'd been wanting for weeks, and decided to pawn the compass during my lunch break the next day.

The ice-skaters take my place in front of the ATM as I move away, tucking the wallet into an inner pocket of my coat and replacing my gloves. I'll have to hurry if I'm going to make it to the theatre on time. Benedict and I have tickets for a comedian – according to Benedict's college friends he's very good. I'm sure it will be execrable, but it's Benedict's birthday tomorrow so he can laugh if he wants to.

Being evicted from my flat was a real wake-up call. I turned up on Elliott and Larry's doorstep with a suitcase and a bunch of flowers taken from the library canteen. The three of us sat in the chintz palace they call their living room and drank instant coffee. 'He's young enough to be your effing son,' said Larry. I agreed, examining the reflection of the sunlight off my Italian shoes. 'And he's a tosser.' I shook my head.

'Why do you have such a failing for pretty little faces, Jacob? I was saving you for when Larry finally cracks and divorces me.' Elliott laughed at his own joke and linked arms with Larry on the sofa. Neither Larry nor I smiled.

Benedict often remarks that he finds it strange I have so many friends who are also ex-lovers. I know he'll change his tune when he has a few more of his own under his belt; once sexual attraction has been explored and burnt out, the shell it leaves is so very comfortable to crawl around in.

‘When are you going to grow up?’ Larry asked. I shrugged. They agreed I could move into their basement. Larry’s mother lived there until she died, and they’ve not got back into the habit of using it for anything more than prop storage.

‘We’ll find a way for you to pay us back,’ said Elliott, winking salaciously. Larry carried my suitcase downstairs and I borrowed his car to collect the rest of my things.

Benedict’s full lower lip wobbled when I told him the news. ‘How can you bear to live in Brixton?’ he asked. ‘Don’t you want your privacy?’

‘Elliott and Larry are having cash-flow problems.’ Lying through my teeth was getting easier every day. ‘They asked if I could move in. The rent pays their mortgage.’

‘You’re such a good friend.’ Benedict kissed me. ‘But I’m not staying overnight in that shit-hole.’

He kept his word. Every penny I saved in rent went straight out the window shuttling him home in unnecessary taxis night after night.

These tickets weren’t cheap: I shoe-horned them onto my credit card. I booked on Benedict’s laptop, waiting until he went to the bathroom before processing the payment. If it hadn’t gone through I was going to throw a glass of water over the keyboard and claim it had crashed.

Ceci is throwing a family lunch tomorrow, to which I’m not quite invited. It was easy to arrange a meeting at last minute with a fictional Library Board member. You can say what you like to Benedict, he just laps it up.



My lips burn when I think about him. The scarf around my neck feels like his thighs. It's almost too warm. I have to unwind it, let the night air circulate around my throat. Help me breathe.

When this money goes – and I know already there's a few rounds of drinks and a taxi back to mine and then the inevitable taxi back to his – then I won't have a penny in the world. I haven't paid Larry a thing since I've moved in. This morning there was a polite note in their fridge telling me of course to keep helping myself to their groceries. I didn't realise they knew I knew where their spare key was. I'm surprised they hadn't just changed the alarm code.

Another overdraft wouldn't be all that bad. There's no chance of a promotion, not with the number of sick days I've had recently, but the bank won't know that. Something can be arranged. I can't keep pleading cash from Elliott on the sly.

The air smells and feels like imminent snow: oil and metal at the back of my throat. I'm going to be too early again. I slow down, trying to avoid the piles of slush. Watermarked shoes wouldn't go down well. Everything has to be perfect – tonight and every night – so that Benedict doesn't get bored.

In the theatre bar I prop myself up in a corner, warming up before taking off my coat. This coat was more expensive than anything I'm wearing underneath, might as well get the benefit of the cut while I can. First impressions count for everything; you never know who Benedict might turn up with. He promised tonight would just be the two of us, but I can never take that for granted.

Flex my fingers, I try to remember exactly how much cash I took out. Perhaps there's enough to get something to eat. I'm early enough to nip out for a sandwich. So long as it doesn't have mayo. I'd thought I was in pretty good shape until I saw Benedict naked, stretching. He wanted us to go to the gym and work-out together. I lied and said I already had a private membership deal through work. He sulked for a week and I had to buy him a new hat before he got over it. I promised I'd look into him joining 'my gym': I've never been in a gym in my life. I sneak up into Larry and Elliott's when they're out and use their treadmill. I hide my weights in the cupboard when I know Benedict is coming over. I finger the advice-slip in my pocket, then I spot Benedict.

Benedict arrives by himself, but he sees some non-mutual friends before we've said more than hello and pulls out of my embrace. I tell him I'll get the drinks in and he waits long enough to place his order then I'm left mouthing *I love you* at the seam down the back of the Burberry jacket I bought him. A few seconds later his friends are squealing hello and I can see how damn young they all are and I try really, really hard not to care.

Once I've placed our order, I reach into the inside pocket of my jacket but my wallet isn't there. I check the outside pockets. I pat myself up and down. I check the bar in front of me. I check by my feet. My head swims and I have to stand straight, hands splayed on the bar, watching the barman making the drinks I cannot pay for.

My first grief is for the wallet itself, made of real leather and costing more than a month's wage. Benedict has taught me how to discern the difference, running one's fingertips lightly over the surface as if in search for static. There's an irregular grain in

*proper* leather. I rub it with special cream every Sunday, ritually working my way through my new accessories. I brush animal hairs off the coat, polish the two good pairs of shoes. I divide the dry cleaning into *desperate* and *can last another week*. I iron the bed sheets. I take everything out of my wallet and rub it with leather cream, leaving it to soak in overnight. I put on a facemask, moisturising hand gloves, and a hot oil treatment in my hair.

I'm so caught up in missing the wallet that I barely think about the money that was in it. I think how there's no rush to cancel my credit cards because there isn't a drop more to be squeezed out of them anyway. I try to remember if I had any photos in it. Maybe that handwritten note from Benedict—or did I put that in my diary?

I think about how the dark brown colour was like melted chocolate and when I first saw it in the shop I wanted to lick it. It matches my eyes. It matches my belt. I touch my belt, reassuring myself it's still there. I tuck in my fingers and stroke it with my thumb, feeling the supple pressure of authenticity. In this meditative stance, I feel calm. My wallet is gone.

I check the inner pocket again, disbelieving its emptiness. I take the advice-slip out of my pocket and look at the numbers printed on it. It strikes me that this is a final record of all the cash I have just lost. I put my hand back inside the inner jacket pocket where – and I'm certain – I put my wallet, safely. Then it sinks in that the pocket is as empty of cash as my bank account. All that money, gone. I have to sit down. I think I'm about to hyperventilate.

All I feel is ice. I can't feel the overheating scarf, the weight of the coat, or any circulation in my hands. I rub my fingers. I can't feel my hands. I think I'm going blind. There's a rushing in my ears.

*I'm twelve years old again. I'm standing half in and half out of the glass sliding doors leading from my parents' office to the small patio at the back of our house. French windows, my mother calls them. She loves languages, loves books, loves words; eats them up. She's writing letters at the desk while my father takes a delivery. She's writing so fast. She's angry that I keep bothering her. I can hear the men calling outside and the wet crunch of the wooden pallets as they unload them onto the gravel. The lorry is reversing with a heavy, low beeping. My mother rubs her temples. Without turning around, she tells me to shut the bloody door already. I'm so proud that I've remembered they're called French windows, but when I correct her she balls up the piece of paper in front of her and throws it at me, still not looking, and hisses like a kettle.*

*I step inside the doors as quietly as possible. I pull the French windows shut and they snake across faster than I expect, trapping my left hand.*

*The pain is cold and hot at the same time. It travels up and down my arm in shivers. I bite at my lips and shut my eyes, keeping quiet. I stand there and wait to be released. My other arm is limp. My knees are limp. I can't help myself. I slide down onto the carpet – soundless – and wait there, my hand hanging like a flag above my head.*

*I don't remember how long it takes before my mother comes over to retrieve the ball of paper she threw at me.*

My head is hanging down between my knees and I'm vaguely proud of myself for having remembered that tip, in a time of crisis. I'm still holding the advice-slip in one hand and I focus on it, trying to drag myself back into the moment and deal with the situation. At the bottom, handwritten in biro, are the words *Spend less. Think more.*

I always thought that time would slow down in a moment like this. Long, clear, treacly moments of realisation. But the bar is filling up. Someone takes the spare chair next to me. I'm hidden behind a wall of bodies and I don't think I've moved, haven't had a single thought. From this position I catch occasional glimpses of Benedict and his friends. His scarf matches mine. Green to my blue. Tonight we're aquatic. He turns around, scanning for more acquaintances and perhaps wondering where his drink is. I duck my head back down.

I can call Elliott and promise this really will be the last time, get him to drop some cash in to the box office during the first half. Then I can tell Benedict I misunderstood about the drinks and ordered them for the interval. In the meantime maybe someone will find and hand in the wallet. Without taking any money from it. Shit. The tickets for tonight were in the wallet. Did I write this, did I write *Spend less. Think more?* Did someone at the bank do it, for a laugh, scrawling on a pile of empty receipts waiting to be printed? The handwriting is familiar. They can reprint the tickets, surely. People must forget them all the time. I can check at the box office and call good old Elliott at the same time. Sweet talk him into doing me just one more little favour for old time's sake.

That bastard Elliott isn't picking up. At the box office, they're refusing to reprint the tickets without the credit card from the original booking. 'It's been stolen,' I say, but they refuse to make an exception. I press redial and wonder it will take for Elliott to agree to pay for a new pair of tickets. I watch the hands of the people coming through the twin revolving doors in case one of them is holding my wallet.

Still no answer. I am torn between waiting for Elliott to check his bastard phone, or telling Benedict I fell ill and must go home immediately, freeing me up to retrace my steps back to the ATM. I redial and watch the second-hand tick round the large clock face above the box office. There are twenty minutes left before it's too late. The phone rings, unanswered. 'Waiting for someone, mate?' It's Larry, standing behind me with his arms folded. My knees are weak with relief. I am saved.

'Where's Elliott?'

'Do you need to talk to him about something?' I peer over Larry's shoulder, wondering if Elliott is in the toilet or checking his coat.

'He isn't answering his phone. Did he leave it at home?'

'I'm here to talk to someone.'

'Did you arrive together?'

'No we did not effing arrive together.' The corners of Larry's mouth are trembling. His hands are gripping his arms. 'Elliott isn't here.'

'Actually, it's really amazing that you're here, Larry, because the thing is I'm in a bit of a fix.'

‘Let me guess. You want to borrow some money.’ Larry’s foot is tapping on the tiles. ‘I’m telling him, Jacob.’

‘I’m trying to tell him myself but he isn’t picking up.’

‘Not Elliott. I’m telling your effing mid-life crisis boytoy.’ In my hand, the phone clicks on to Elliott’s voicemail again and I hang up.

‘You know I hate it when you talk about Benedict like that.’

‘I’m going to tell him you have no money. I was talking to Ceci earlier. She had no idea you were our guest. Did you know that?’

‘Ceci and I don’t talk much.’

‘She seemed to be under the impression that you were helping us with the financial crisis I was unaware we were going through.’ To anyone watching us, we’re just a pair of friends hanging around near the entrance stair of a theatre. I can’t help but notice how good my coat looks compared to Larry’s tatty old thing. It’s not as if he couldn’t afford something better. I don’t understand why they insist on living out in Brixton; they could easily afford somewhere more salubrious. Larry makes good money on the nightclub circuit, entertaining punters with his card tricks and making their watches disappear. I entertain wild ideas of them moving to Chelsea and Benedict moving into the basement of their new place with me. ‘It isn’t the lies that concern me, Jacob. It’s the stealing.’

‘I’ll replace the cheese. And the wine. And the pizzas. I didn’t think you’d mind.’ I didn’t think he’d notice.

‘And the tie-pin? And the cufflinks?’

‘I can explain.’ I really didn’t think he’d notice.

‘Did you know those ornaments belonged to Elliott’s grandmother? I’ll bet you didn’t even get half their real value. He puts one finger up – pointing at me – and drives it into my chest as he walks forward, pushing me back up against a wall. A couple of people glance at us and hurry up the stairs to the Grand Circle bar. ‘Do you think I’m some kind of idiot?’

‘I was desperate. I needed the money.’ That’s true, at least.

‘I hope he was worth it.’ A thousand times over.

‘I’ll tell him.’ I won’t.

‘I wish I could believe you.’ I wish you would.

‘I love him.’ That’s true, too.

‘It’s none of my business.’ He removes his finger. I put my hand up to massage the skin, wondering if it will leave a bruise. ‘I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for Elliott.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Both of us know I’m not.

‘He blames the cleaner.’ I nod, the shame itching like a rash on my neck. Hidden by my pocket, I crumple the advice-slip in my fist ‘I don’t want to fire her. I said I’d look into it. I’d appreciate it if you could write me a list of where you sold them.’

‘I can’t thank you enough for letting me stay. Larry.’

‘I don’t want Elliott to be more upset than necessary. I would never ask him to stop seeing you.’ I grab Larry’s arm.

‘We’ve been friends for so long. We’re like brothers.’



‘I’d never ask him, but I am going to ask you,’ Larry looks me in the eye and I feel cold again. ‘It’s time for you to leave, Jacob.’

‘Benedict is waiting for me upstairs.’ I let go of his arm. We both know that isn’t what he means.

‘There’s no need for any fuss. I’ll give you a month.’ He smooths down the sleeve of his tatty old coat. ‘I used to like you, Jacob. You’ve turned into a right tosser.’

‘I can change,’ I’m ready to promise anything.

‘I hope you can. Once you’ve moved out, I don’t think you and Elliott need to stay in touch. I had the upstairs locks changed this afternoon.’ I nod. Larry sighs and says he wishes me well, really he does.

‘The thing is, I need to ask you a favour.’ My face gets redder as I talk, stumbling over the story of the lost wallet. I look at my beautifully polished shoes.

‘You’re asking me for money?’ Larry puts a hand out and raises my face, forcing me to look him in the eye. I nod. He waits.

‘Yes.’ He fumbles in his pocket and brings out a wallet. My wallet.

‘I wanted to see what you’d do.’ He holds the wallet out. I snatch it from him and start looking through it.

‘You took it?’

‘Did you think – even once – about telling Benedict the truth?’ It looks like all the money is still there. I bring the advice-slip out and uncrumple it, double checking the amount. Something clicks when I see the handwriting at the bottom.

‘Did you write this?’ He has a sick sense of humour. The warning bell for the first curtain starts to ring. A pre-recorded voice asks us to make our way into the auditorium. Larry smiles at me and walks away. I find the tickets. He’s written on them too, the same looping letters. *I can’t afford these and I can’t afford to keep lying to you.*

As we take our seats, Benedict apologises for leaving me on my own. ‘I haven’t seen Graham for ages. You understand, don’t you?’ I say that I do. I tell him I had to go out and take a call.

‘Sorry about your drink, darling.’

‘Can I have my ticket? I want to go out to the toilet and I’ll need it to get back in.’ I root in my pocket.

‘Can’t find the stub. Just tell the usher you’ll be back in a minute.’ He pouts and waits. I exaggerate the motions of my search. ‘You’d better hurry, it’s almost curtain-up.’ He pushes past my knees. When he’s gone I take the tickets out and read Larry’s message again. Then I tear them into tiny pieces and drop the scraps under my seat.

### **Wish you weren't here**

Eventually – in an old box of old postcards on a stall in Spitalfields Market – I find what I hadn't known I was looking for: an old, sepia postcard of a bare room.

The room is almost clinical in its sparseness. The walls are bare, the single bed is uninvitingly made-up in sheets that I am certain would be brown even if the postcard were in glorious Technicolor. The one armchair, half out of shot, is high-backed and stiff looking. On the back of the postcard is a single line in beautiful copperplate, faded almost to illegibility.

*You, me, Margate?* is the most oddly inviting thing I have heard suggested for a long time. I picture myself and Benedict wrapped up in long dark overcoats and old fashioned caps. Walking along a cold beachfront, we discuss if it is safe to hold hands in front of the locals. Dinner somewhere with an open fire, then back to a room we have an equal claim to and an equal desire to be in.

The anticipated joy of hotels – I know – is often better than the actual product. I'll book somewhere cheap so that we aren't disappointed. So that I can pay for the whole thing myself.

I'll mount the postcard to make it more permanent. More thoughtful. Then I can take it out of the paper-cut holders and show Benedict the inscription on the back and the whole thing will be a secret promise that everything is going to work out and be fun again. I'll give him a whole weekend of undivided attention in Margate.

All afternoon I trail my fingers down the spines of books, barely noticing where I'm putting them on the shelves. Before I leave the administrative offices, I switch off everyone else's monitors. I turn the kettle off at the wall and rinse out the coffee pot. I'm in a dream and watch my fingers dispassionately as they turn taps, press buttons and wipe surfaces. It's like they're dancing over every surface, checking it's still there, still real. As the lift carries me downstairs, I admire the simplicity of the postcard one last time, then hide it in my briefcase.

In the bar, Elliott is drinking a martini and watching the leaves blow off the lone tree in the street outside. 'That's a perfect card,' he says, turning it over and over between his fingers and smiling at me.

'Don't get it wet.'

'Perfect for Benedict.'

'Have you ordered anything to eat?'

'Empty. Just like his head.' I take back the postcard and put it away from tilting glasses and greasy hands. He nods his head towards the menu.

'Share something?'

'I've lost half a stone since Christmas.' I put a hand on my stomach, then take it away. Smug doesn't go down well with Elliott. Never has.

'When are you going to get rid of that annoying little child, Jacob? You know he bores me. He barely said a word at dinner last week.'

'You intimidate him. On purpose.'

‘He’s living on financial handouts from his mother and emotional handouts from you.’

‘How’s your philandering husband? Still trying to wipe out the memory of your wrinkly old corpse by trawling Soho?’

‘I’ll split a Caesar salad to keep us going. No croutons.’

‘I’ll eat them.’

‘You’ll get fat, and I’ll have nobody left to pine after.’

‘Maybe you’ll get thin and steal Benedict from me.’ Elliott turns the corners of his mouth down at me, waves down a waitress and orders me a martini to match his own and no croutons in the salad. I check my phone.

‘Is that your boy-toy, behind that tree?’ Elliot asks and I half rise to get a better look. ‘Made you look.’

‘Have you nothing better to think about?’

‘Not really. Do you enjoy being stalked?’

‘It wasn’t him.’ I look away, and catch a glimpse of my face in the mirror behind the bar; my cheeks are darkened with a hot flush.

‘But you believed it could have been.’ Elliott raises an eyebrow at me. I change the subject.

Benedict caught a cold on a friend’s yacht. The cold turned into a chest infection. His mother discouraged me from visiting or, rather, her housekeeper did. In the end, I send him a parcel with the mounted post-card and a note telling him to read the back. There’s a

bank holiday coming up. I think that we should book somewhere soon, make a long weekend of it. The sea-air will do him good. Even though it's a Saturday and maybe the post will be late, I make sure I stay within earshot of the house phone.

The pile of ironing goes down steadily and I start to think that I should have paid extra for a courier. I'm wiping dust from the top of the curtain rail when the phone goes, flashing up Benedict's home line. I pause for a moment, stretch my lips into a smile and take a deep breath. Then I pick up the handset.

'Jacob.' The voice is as pointed and welcoming as a hypodermic syringe.

'Ceci? Is Benedict alright?' I wonder if there's a darker reason I haven't been allowed to see Benedict while he's been ill other than his mother's dislike of having me under her roof. I picture Benedict with rail-thin arms and a yellow complexion. I feel like I've been thrown back into the 1980s without warning.

'You're a disgusting idiot. You're fucking up my son's life. I shan't allow it. This whole thing has gone far enough.' I've always thought that Benedict's mother has a shrill voice. I make allowances for the terror of a mother whose child is dying. I wonder if she thinks I gave it to him. I wonder where he caught it. Ceci keeps the rant going, telling me that she's the only one who sees where this is all going to end.

'I'm the only one who has any power to stop it. So that's what I'm doing, I'm stopping this. You don't talk to my son again, you don't see my son.' She slams the phone down hard enough to hurt my ear.

The house phone rings again: caller unknown. I wonder if Ceci has hired a hit-man. I crouch down on the floor before answering it, in case he's aiming through the

window. Then I tell myself I'm being ridiculous; my boyfriend doesn't have Aids and his mother isn't trying to assassinate me. But I stay down out of sight of the window while I answer.

'I love you.' Benedict's voice, breathy and excited. I exhale in relief and stand up again. 'Mother's horrified. I don't care. You're the best boyfriend ever, and the answer is yes, I'd love to.' If he were dying, I think he'd be less excited about going away for the weekend. I'd hoped he would be charmed by the idea, but I hadn't expected Ceci to be so pissed off. Perhaps she hates me even more than I thought. The idea that she has hidden depths of actual emotion is quite interesting. 'We should start planning!' Benedict's enthusiasm is so enticing, I think I might be falling in love with him all over again.

I tell him to come over to mine. His enthusiasm wanes. I tell him how much I've missed him. I ask him to bring his present and pretend to open it again so I get to see. He perks up. 'I'm sure that in hindsight I'll remember your flat as charming. Not as charming as ours will be,' he says. I think I must have misheard him. Perhaps he's on strange medication and mussing his words.

Benedict turns up two hours later with a bottle of champagne. I kiss him briefly and wrinkle my nose at the bottle. 'Won't your mother be cross that you've stolen her lunch?'

'Play nice,' he says, mock-punching me in the chest. 'You two are going to end up best of friends.' Considering that Ceci and I have spent the best part of the last three decades hating each other, his optimism feels misplaced.

While I find the box with the decent champagne glasses and make us beans on toast, Benedict sets up the laptop in the bedroom-come-sitting room. I'm subjected to a running commentary of *oh* and *lovely* and demands that I drop everything and come to see *this one* immediately.

I set out lunch and call for him. He doesn't respond. I take the oven gloves off and remind myself he has been ill and his ears are probably blocked up and he might have even fallen asleep.

He's stretched flat out on his front on the bed, propped on his elbows, kicking his legs playfully as he scrolls along a list of properties. I peer over his shoulder.

'Battersea?' The screen is full of flats for rent in London. Not hotels in Margate.

'I know, not exactly what you thought I'd choose. But I've been thinking about this for ever so long.'

'You have?'

'So like you to try and keep it a secret. You're such a romantic, my dour Scotsman. I'd guessed though, you see, I'd guessed.' I wonder what exactly Benedict has guessed and when I'll be let in on the secret. Perhaps there has been some mistake.

'You read the back of the postcard, didn't you?'

'Don't worry, I was really careful not to rip it. I was so curious to see where the actual photo was taken though. Pity it doesn't say. I wonder who Margaret was.' Then Benedict goes back to flicking through properties, evincing no noticeable sustained interest in Margaret.

'Margate,' I say.



‘How about this one? It has a roof terrace. Just think what we could do on a roof terrace.’

‘I think it said Margate.’

‘Did it?’

‘I thought we could go to Margate.’

‘That could be fun. Is the champagne cold enough yet?’ I go back into the kitchen. Benedict calls after me, asking how I feel about second bedrooms. I shut the door.

I don’t realise I’m crying until Benedict knocks softly and lets himself in without waiting for an answer. He finds me sitting with my head in my hands, elbows resting on splayed knees. The patchy linoleum is cold through my socks but my face is burning hot and I think my heart is playing hopscotch on my ribcage.

He doesn’t say anything, he just stands behind me and strokes the back of my neck. His hands are really soft. ‘It’s your mother,’ I say, trying out a palliative lie. ‘I’d hate to do this against Cecilia’s wishes. The two of you are so close, and that’s really precious. I’d rather we took a step back – delayed this whole thing – rather than be the cause of a rift between you.’ Benedict snorts. I look up at him, and find that he is laughing.

‘Don’t worry about mother. At best she’s being over protective. Most likely, she’s taking issue because she doesn’t have anyone in her own life. Once the divorce is finalised I’m sure she’ll find someone to marry. She usually does.’ Benedict’s face is

sunny. The worst of it is that Benedict is right. Cecelia is only doing it for the attention, and because she thinks she ought to, given the age-gap and her open dislike for me. She'll come round shortly, if for no other reason than the sheer pleasure of her perceived magnanimity. Cecelia is not going to extricate me from this perverse and ridiculous misunderstanding.

Benedict goes to retrieve the champagne from the freezer and I wipe my face with my sleeve, sniffing vigorously. I jump half out of the chair when the cork goes off and Benedict laughs again, fondly. Then he comes out with another corker.

'I need to know,' he says, curling himself onto my lap and putting his arms around my neck. 'What will you tell your parents?'

'I hadn't thought about that,' I reply, in all honesty.

'Don't you think they'd find it odd, you getting, say, a flatmate. At your age.'

'Perhaps.'

'Particularly as that way you'd find it much, much harder to keep avoiding introducing me to them.'

'Perhaps.' I say. I doubt it, silently.

'I know exactly what you're thinking and I know exactly why they haven't met me yet.' My knee gives a nervous bounce. Benedict interprets this as an invitation to draw even closer in and put his head against my chest. 'Your heart! How sweet, you're nervous. It's because there is no way we could hide our love for each other.'

'Yes?' I have not previously considered this point of view.

'And that was fine, before. But not now.'

‘No?’

‘We’re ready to embrace this change in our life together and I think we need to move forward together, in every way.’

‘Yes?’

‘You agree? You’re ready?’

I can’t think of anything Benedict wants me to say apart from ‘yes’, or anything I want to say apart from ‘no’. I’m not entirely certain we’re following the same conversation but it seems headed into ominously familiar territory.

I shift Benedict off my lap and stand up, ostensibly to pour the champagne. There are words sticking in my throat. I take a sip to calm my nerves. The bubbles stick in with the words and I start choking.

When Benedict hands me the glass of water, I realise that his hand is shaking. He’s pale. I touch my hand to his forehead: he’s burning up. It doesn’t take much to persuade him that he should rest. At home. In his mother’s house.

When I wake up on Sunday morning I can’t remember my dreams. Benedict forgot to take the postcard back with him. I lie in bed and stare at the emptiness in the room on one side. The writing on the other. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

The celebratory bottle is still on the kitchen table. I bring it back to bed with me and drink warm, flat champagne wrapped in my duvet. I stare at the curtains obscuring my view of the window.

My parents would love Benedict. They will love Benedict. They'll say things like *how kind of you to take such a close interest in a friend's son and is he your godson, or is that the one in Norfolk?*. Then they'll ask leading questions about Ceci. They'll ask what colour her eyes are. They'll press me to take her a jar of the local preserves.

Feasibly, I could tell Benedict I've told them and they've cut me off. Or that I'm not going to do it and he'll just have to deal with it.

Margate. Benedict and I can move there and set up a little B & B. Or run a ye olde tea-shoppe. We can be that lovely gay couple who teach the locals tolerance through example. We'll become favourites with the old ladies and get right in on the coffee mornings and local gossip. We'll be referred to as Jay and Ben, the couple who run that place by the park. Yes, we're, you know. But we're so lovely. Such a laugh. Always beautifully turned out and with such wonderful manners.

My leg cramps under the duvet and I have to get up and walk it off. I'm falling to pieces.

The door entry buzzer cuts into my thoughts. I forget it's Sunday and think it must be the postman with a parcel. I could do with a present about now. Possibly a pile of books from Elliott and a note complaining that I never call him.

It's Ceci. A visit from Ceci does not constitute a present. She stands stock-still in the hallway wearing sunglasses, a headscarf, gloves and radiating disapproval as powerfully as her white jasmine eau de toilette. I invite her in. She nudges a half-full mop bucket out of her path in the kitchen, and I take the hint and empty it in the sink while she shudders. I'm wearing a pair of boxers and a bathrobe.

Perched on the thinnest possible amount of a wooden kitchen chair, Ceci's spine is rigid and her hands are crossed over the handbag on her knees. She stares at my bare feet and I try to remember if I cut my toenails last week or not.

Unfortunately, Ceci has come to give her sanction to Benedict and my 'plans' to move in together. She outlines in clipped, precise terms exactly what Benedict can expect her to provide, financially.

'Shouldn't you be telling him this?' I ask. She sniffs. I'm starting to warm to the idea. For what she's offering I could cut back on my overtime at the library.

It is Ceci who brings up the issue of my parents. She offers, stiffer than ever, to be available for family meetings. My head is beginning to ache from the flat champagne and I'm very aware that I went to bed without brushing my teeth. We lapse into silence while I get myself a glass of water.

'My parents don't know I'm gay.' Ceci expresses a modest amount of incredulity. She assures me that they must know, on some level. I don't feel able to contribute much to the conversation beyond asking her how much she wants to lay down on that bet. She asks me how work is going. I can imagine her mentally ticking off the list of polite subjects she feels compelled to cover before she is allowed to leave

'I've got Monday off,' I say. 'To unpack.'

'I hardly see the point, given that you are about to move again.'

'When I booked it off, I didn't know.'

‘That he would say yes?’ Ceci stands up and indicates that she is ready to leave. I follow her back out into the hallway and lean over a stack of paintings to support myself against the wall. My headache is getting worse.

She pulls her gloves on. After another pause she extends a brown suede hand towards me and I reach out to shake it, then pull my bathrobe shut. I ask her not to tell anyone about ‘our plans’ until I’ve spoken to my parents. She looks me up and down, looks around the narrow brown hallway, then agrees. I detect a mixture of pity and relief in her voice.

Because it’s Sunday evening, I call my parents to tell them that another week has passed and that I still love them. When my mother asks how I’ve spent my weekend I tell her that I’ve got a headache from office politics and that I had coffee with my friend Cecelia this morning. She passes the phone back to my father so that we can discuss the weather and say our goodbyes. I begin peeling the paint off the windowsill. The damp patch from the leak upstairs is growing.

My father agrees that the rain looks set to continue until at least Thursday. I lift my shoulder to hold the phone against my ear and hold my hands up in front of me. I press my fingers into a square, into a photo frame. A camera shutter. I look through my hands at the unmade room beyond and imagine how it would look on a postcard.

### **Bound Together**

The day of my mother's first suicide attempt she gave me a book. The original dust jacket had been replaced by a plastic cover, the table of contents had been ripped out and the spine had been so loosened through being bent about that the whole thing felt almost fluid in my hands. Before she gave it to me she made me scrub the potting-shed dirt out from under my nails.

That first time she took an overdose of sleeping pills. My father found her on the spare room bed, vomiting on a patchwork quilt. I was called out of the classroom and rode in a taxi to the hospital holding my French teacher's hand and reciting irregular verbs to pass the time. Nobody had told me where or why I was being sent; I thought I'd done something wrong and was going to be tested. I'm sure I must have made mistakes but my teacher didn't correct me once.

The book was in Spanish. My mother told me to look after it for her. She was in hospital for three days. The book sat on the desk in my room – unread, untouched. I spent a lot of time helping dad with seedlings. School wasn't mentioned and I was left under the impression that I had been suspended. I certainly remember a terrible sense of guilt; that I was the one who had done something wrong. For an eleven year old, it was one hell of a burden.

After dad brought my mother back from the hospital, she went into my room and took the book back. Two years later, at the time the snowbells started making a white

blanket in the woods along from my friend Liam's house, the book reappeared on my desk. Pills, again.

The knives came out when the book turned up on my pillow. I stayed after school for football practice and walked home, adolescent legs now long enough to cope with the five mile trek across the fields. I had a sandwich and went upstairs and there it was, upside down but still instantly recognisable as that same book. I found her in the bathroom. The ambulance arrived before dad was home and I forgot to leave him a note. When I called him from the payphone at the hospital, he was watching television and wondering if he was supposed to be at a parent-teacher night. That weekend, dad and I repainted the bathroom.

Attempts four and five came much closer together, just after my Highers and then just before I went to spend the rest of the summer with relatives in Perthshire. I took the book with me and refused to talk to my mother when she called. She sent me a lot of letters. I don't remember talking to many people that summer, just a lot of sitting on low stone walls, staring at sheep and ripping up unopened envelopes.

Despite hiding the book at the back of my wardrobe, under the shoe box of X-rated magazines, my mother found it and took it back. She never mentioned the porn. I burnt it – the book, not the porn – after thwarting attempt number six. While she didn't seem particularly concerned that I had found and destroyed her stash of medication, finding the paper ash and the charred bindings in the grate was a different matter. As soon as I hit eighteen I moved to the preferable anonymity of London. Over the last two and a half decades I've given up counting the number of times she can't come to the



phone because she's 'busy' or dad pretends she's at Auntie Jean's for a couple of days. Out of sight, out of mind; we all have our secrets.

No matter how this ends, it ends today. I can't keep lying any more.

\*

At least my father has the decency to look at the floor while he breaks my heart. 'She says she won't come out until you're away.'

'Tell her I'll wait as long as it takes,'

'She won't like it.'

'She doesn't have to.' I sit back down on the cold hall bench and crack my knuckles.

Dad disappears back through the arch, closing the heavy wooden door behind him. I study the pictures on the wall and try to listen in – unsuccessfully. After a short while he returns, shaking his head. 'Best that you leave, son. For tonight.' I shake my head. Dad begins nodding in sympathy. 'The pub lets rooms out. I'll call them for you.'

'Don't bother,' I put my hand over my father's on the handset. His skin is cold. Both our hands look old. 'Let me try myself once more.'

He follows me under the arch, leaving the door open this time. I can't help but think of it as a pre-emptive escape route.

In contrast with the hallway, the kitchen is comfortingly warm. My father stops with his back to the Aga and nods towards the pine door leading through to the office extension. 'She locked it. The key's in the lock. I can't open it.'

'Did she open it for you?' He shakes his head. 'Did you ask her to?' He shrugs.

I knock politely on the pine door. Up close, it is covered in dents. There is no response. I knock harder. Nothing. ‘Mother?’ Still nothing. ‘I want to come in.’ Behind me I hear the kettle being filled at the sink. The metallic click as the lid goes back into place. ‘Will you come out, then?’ Nothing. I knock again.

The wood of the door is cold. It smoothes into my forehead as I lean against it. Blocking what I’m doing from my father, I test the door handle. It doesn’t turn. I stand in silence and listen for movement in the locked room. Nothing.

The kettle sings and dad asks me if I’d like a cup of tea. I say that yes please, that would be delightful.

‘I’ll call the pub.’ He’s already moving back out into the hallway. I speak quickly, quietly, hoping my voice carries through the pine door but nowhere else. I apologise. I promise to change. I promise that things can be different. There is no reply.

Dad puts his hand on my shoulder and I jump. ‘No space at the pub. I’ve booked you in at the Glendower.’

‘Do you hear that? He’s turning me out.’ My voice is uncomfortably loud; it echoes off the tiles. I don’t want to turn around. Any moment, surely, the pine door will open. ‘I’m not going willingly.’

‘I’ll book a taxi.’

‘I’m not going.’

‘I’ll bring your bags down.’ My father is off again, creaking up the stairs and slamming through the drawers and the cupboards in my old bedroom.

I turn my back to the pine door, propping myself against it. The dishes from lunch are stacked by the sink. Those are the flowers I bought at the station, in the glass vase on the sideboard. I know there is mince in the fridge, intended for my dinner.

By the time my father comes downstairs with my things I've warmed the pot, found cups and saucers that match and thrown away all the packets of biscuits which are past their sell-by date. 'Should we call the police?' I ask, passing him the chocolate digestives. If he doesn't keep his blood sugar up then he gets snappy.

'What would we say?'

'What would you say?'

'She'll come out when you leave.' Awkward pause. I pour the tea. Dad tries to drink it straight away. He keeps a brave face on, sipping and sipping as if he isn't burning his tongue.

There is no noise from behind the pine door. No shifting or sighing. I wonder if she has the weekend papers in there. There's no rustling, no shuffling. 'Do you have a photo?' He reaches for another biscuit.

'Not with me,' I reply.

'What does he look like?'

'Beautiful.'

'When do we get to meet him?'

'He wanted to come with me this weekend but I told him I wanted some time alone with you guys. Besides, he has some commitments to see through.'

'Does he have kids?'

‘He’s nineteen.’ Dad raises his eyebrows and we go back to sipping tea in silence.

The taxi turns up half an hour later and Dad takes my luggage out to it while I whisper my goodbyes to the silence behind the pine door.

\*

The curtains in the hotel room are long, thick and, as it turns out, largely ornamental. Designed to frame the window rather than draw across it, it takes me a frustrating ten minutes to find the privacy blind.

The lighting is not flattering, bringing out the grey in my hair and giving the impression that I have crow’s feet. I shave – bringing the day to an end – and dress for dinner.

Eating a dry pork chop by myself in the hotel restaurant, I am the only person in the room under retirement age, including the waitress. Beyond ordering and refusing anything but tap water, I haven’t spoken for an hour. Back in the room I call my voicemail even though there are no missed calls, no messages waiting for me. Dad hasn’t called to update me and I’m too exhausted to risk being hung up on. No news is good news. I call Benedict and he clucks down the phone to me. ‘Give her time,’ he advises. He makes shushing noises as I sob and wipe the receiver with the corner of the bed sheet.

‘I hate this,’ I say. He shushes me. ‘It would be so much easier if you didn’t exist.’

‘You said your Dad wants to meet me. That’s good.’

‘What if she never talks to me again?’

‘What would you really be missing out on?’ The line goes cold between us. I can feel it like a string of icicles, spreading between me and him. He tries to back-track. ‘You’ve always said they don’t really know you.’

‘If it doesn’t matter, why did you make me tell them about you?’

He’s quiet for a beat. I hold my breath. ‘Because I want to matter to you.’

‘You know you’re the most important person in the world to me.’

He waits again before answering. ‘If you say so.’

‘Don’t start with this again.’

‘If it’s so easy to lie to them, how is it any different with me?’

‘It just is. I’ve had a really long day.’ The hotel room is full of shadows.

‘Don’t cry. Stop crying. We can talk about this when you get back tomorrow.’

‘I’m going to stay here for a couple of extra days.’

‘Don’t punish me because she’s shutting you out again. It’s my exhibition on Monday, or had you forgotten? You said you’d help me with the crates. Will you be back in time or will I meet you at the gallery?’

‘I want to be there.’ We both know that isn’t a real answer. He says he’ll call me tomorrow. I blow him kisses down the phone as he hangs up.

I sleep like the dead, face pressed hard into the unfamiliar pillow, blankets hunched around my shoulders to keep out the cold. In my dreams I can feel the distances between me and my loved ones like sheets of steel.

According to dad, my mother has been out of the office several times to eat, sleep and bathe. He sums up her mood as quieter than usual, but fine.

‘Will she talk to me?’

‘I’ll get us another round.’ When he gets back I ask if I can come over for dinner and he says he forgot to get the crisps. I sip the brackish pint in front of me and when he comes back with two packets of salt and vinegar I tell him they taste better than the cooking at the hotel and we both pretend to laugh.

I text Benedict and tell him I’m getting the train tomorrow but I won’t be back in time to help with the set-up so I’ll meet him at the opening and he should wear the blue Armani jacket. I tell my dad I’ll drop by the house on the way to the station and he says probably best if I don’t. As we’re walking down the gravel path to the crossroads, I tell my dad I love him and he says he’s proud of me and I think that once I’m back in London – with Benedict – perhaps I will get used to being in a de facto single parent family. I have only one question left to ask.

‘What was that book Mum used to have, the Spanish one?’ He says he doesn’t know what I’m talking about. Then he says he has to go home, check on my mother.

‘What about a nightcap?’

‘Travel safe, son.’ He clasps my hand and pats my shoulder then he’s gone down the dark road and I’m alone, slightly drunk and confused in a landscape that used to be familiar.

The radiator in the room is lukewarm and the room is freezing. I pull the spare blankets down from the top of the wardrobe and wrap myself in them while I pack. I

wake up a few hours later with a sore neck, propped up against the foot of the bed with the contents of the case strewn in front of me. I can't get back to sleep.

\*

The taxi driver turns his engine off. I tell him to wait then as the numbers on the clock tick over I change my mind. He looks dour as he heaves my case out the boot. I tip generously but his face remains a slab. Halfway up the drive I change my mind again but either he can't see me waving or the taxi driver is pissed off by my indecision and doesn't stop, doesn't come back. The wheels on my pull-on bump and rock the case over the gravel. The handles of the two carrier bags of books from the charity shop on the High Street cut deeply into the palm of my left hand. I breathe deeply and tell myself that this is worth the effort.

Blank faced, my mother answers the front door. Her eyes don't seem to register my face, but she still slams the door shut on my foot when I step forward; the pain is a relief because it focuses me and I know what to say.

'I brought your book with me.' The pressure lessens and her eyes appear at the slit by the door jamb. I let go of my case and heave up the two carrier bags to press my point home. The edges of the books are starting to split the plastic. Her eyes narrow. 'Let me in and I'll give it back.'

The front door swings open to reveal her disappearing through into the kitchen. I close it behind me, leaving the case and slipping my shoes off. When I sit down at the kitchen table and start massaging my crushed arch, she moves to stand in the open

doorway to the study. I stand up and she takes a step backwards. 'I'm just going to make a cup of tea. You want one?' She nods.

I don't know when my mother got so old. She has always had a pinched look on her face, and her hair has been grey since my early teens, but there's something different about her now. Perhaps it's just that I've never noticed her habits before. Every time I make a noise – setting the cups on the counter, shutting the fridge door – she flinches. Her hands pick at her face. She looks as though someone crumpled her up, like a piece of paper, then tried to smooth her out again. I don't remember her being like this over our Christmas lunch in London – less than two months ago – but I wasn't looking for it then. Her hands move down from her face and pick at the edges of her cardigan instead. I question the truth of dad's claim that she has been sleeping.

I lean across the table to put the cup close to her. She stays standing when I sit down. I take a book out of one of the carrier bags and slide it her way. 'A present.' She picks it up greedily but her eyes dull when she looks at the first page and she puts it down again. 'You're not getting *your* book back until you talk to me.' She picks the cup of tea up and puts it down again. Her fingers tap on the cover of the book. I take another book out of the bag and hold it out of her reach. 'Where's Dad?' She looks over her shoulder into the office, shrugs, and turns her attention back to the book in my hands. 'Is he going to be back soon?' She shakes her head slowly. I give her the second book.

By the time I've handed over the fourth book, I'm uneasy that she's still answering my questions with shrugs and shakes. She nods when I ask if she's taking her medication, but her eyes stray to the bag of books on my lap and I've never been good at



guessing when she's lying. I stop asking her questions and instead I start telling her things. I tell her about the problems with the management at the library. I tell her how I met Benedict. Her eyes keep a swaying focus on the slow passage of books from the plastic bag to her tapping hands. She doesn't drink her tea. When she begins jiggling in her seat and looking towards the study, I give her another book.

Eventually there are only two books left in the second bag. I'm noticing all the sharp things in the kitchen; too many to take away. If I leave in the next ten minutes I can make it back in time for Benedict's show. I won't have time to change. I call a taxi while my mother re-reads the blurb on the back of one of the books from the charity shop and wrinkles her nose. 'Are you ever going to talk to me again?' She hesitates and then I hear the key in the lock and she's on her feet, piling the books into her arms and taking them into the study. I can hear Dad whistling while he scrapes his boots. She looks me in the eye just before she closes the study door and the hatred I glimpse throws me off balance.

'Where is she?' Dad does not look pleased to see me. I point at the pine door. 'How did you get in?'

'My taxi will be here in a minute. I just wanted to say goodbye.'

'You know how she gets.'

'Aren't you glad that I told you the truth?' The taxi arrives, saving him from having to answer. I ball the empty carrier bag up and put it in with the last two books. Dad carries my case to the taxi for me. We shake hands and there is dirt under his fingernails, the sheer normality of which reassures me that he can cope with anything. Anything he decides to accept is happening.

‘Do you need cash?’ he asks.

‘That’s not why I’m here. Not this time.’

‘For the taxi fare.’ I shake my head. He shuts the door for me, checking all my limbs are safely tucked in. Then he tells the driver to take me to the train station and gives him a tenner. Once we’re definitely out of sight, I tell the driver to take me to The Glendower.

\*

‘Tell me you’re outside the gallery right now.’

‘You know I want to be there. I really need to talk to you.’

‘It started two hours ago. Are you in a taxi? Why haven’t you replied to any of my texts?’

‘I think my mother has finally gone right over the edge.’

‘Where are you? Everything looks fabulous. I look fabulous; I’m wearing the jacket you bought me. Do you want me to meet you at the entrance?’ It’s hard to hear him over the music pumping in the background.

‘I’m still in Scotland. I couldn’t leave her like this.’ Benedict hangs up. I rub the last of the sleep out of my eyes. I open a window to let in some fresh air as the room is now overly stuffy and, even though I’m stripped to my boxers, I still think I might choke in here. I drink a glass of water and call him back.

‘Aren’t you even going to apologise?’

‘You know I want to be there with you rather than here, alone. I don’t think I can get through this, darling.’ I rub my forehead.

‘You should have let me come with you. When are you coming back?’

‘Things aren’t good at home, Benedict. Can you go somewhere quieter for a minute?’

‘Everyone is here. Why aren’t you here? You’re never here.’

‘Are you drunk?’ I can hear cheering in the background. ‘I need to talk.’

‘They want me for speeches.’ He hangs up before I can beg. I press redial but it goes straight to voicemail.

Rather than face the lonely dining room, I order room service. I lie on top of the bed and read one of the two books left in the carrier bag; an improbable romance by Kitty Patterson called *Mother’s Ruin*.

\*

Wednesday afternoon arrives and Benedict is still refusing to answer my calls, reply to my texts or acknowledge that I exist. When I call mutual friends and ask how his exhibition opening went on Monday they give me evasive answers and tell me to get back to London and sort things out. I don’t tell them why I can’t leave and they don’t ask.

Hiding from my father is difficult. He calls to check I got back to London safely and I pretend the reception is bad and that I can’t hear him. I peer through the windows of my childhood home, getting flower-bed dirt all over my new suede loafers, and I can’t see either of them. In these half-familiar surroundings I regress, knocking on the front door then running down the drive when I realise that dad’s work boots are next to me on the porch. Despite my best Boy’s Own efforts, I don’t see my mother at all. Unsolicited, I

tell the hotel staff I've been visiting local sights and they continue to be indifferent to my presence.

Sick of the unpalatable cooking in the hotel restaurant, I risk a meal in the pub. Dad turns up after about ten minutes and sits with me, uninvited.

'You always were a sly bairn.'

'I think she needs proper care.' He flattens his lips together and looks me up and down. I stare at the grain of the table.

'I know what's best for her.'

'I'm her son.'

'It was a knock, hearing that you've been hiding things from her for so long. She doesn't like secrets.'

'I came here to tell the truth.'

'You should have told me first. She's not in one of her good patches. The truth could have waited.' I offer to buy him a drink but he tells me he can't stay. 'When are you leaving?'

'I don't know.' It's the truth.

'She's sleeping now. She takes her pills early these days. Come and say goodbye tomorrow.' He doesn't reach out for my hand, just puts his cap back on and stands up.

'Can I stay, tonight? In the house?' I don't want to cry in public, not here of all places. My dad tries to look like he's thinking it through, out of pity.

'The doctor says it's best to keep things quiet, when she's like this.' We nod together, sharing memories of her being like this. I can't argue against that.

‘I’ll come round first thing.’ He looks like he’s going to disagree, but my food arrives so he just says that’s fine and leaves me to eat by myself.

Back in the close hotel room, I write a text to Benedict telling him I’ll definitely be back tomorrow afternoon. I don’t send it.

\*

There’s a roll of banknotes in my jacket pocket, given to me along with a suggestion that I don’t visit for a while.

‘I’m all she has,’ my father told me. ‘I have to protect her.’

‘Did you give her something this morning? I think she wants to talk to me but she can’t. She’s really out of it.’

‘That’s how she is now. You’ve been very busy the last few years, Jacob. You haven’t spent much time here.’ He leant forward and I opened my arms for a father-son embrace. Instead he folded the banknotes into my jacket pocket. I hadn’t even seen that he was holding them. ‘Buy your boyfriend a souvenir from Scotland. I doubt we’ll be seeing you up here for a while.’

He went to check if the taxi had arrived and I went back through to the sitting room where my mother was sitting in an armchair, staring at the empty fireplace.

‘I’m going.’ She didn’t move. I held out the last two books but she made no move to take them. ‘I’ll leave these here for you.’ She turned her head slowly and opened her mouth. I put the books down on the coffee table. She shut her mouth. ‘I lied. I wanted to make you talk to me. I thought I could make you love me again.’ She turned her head

back to the fireplace. 'They're just books from a charity shop. I'm sorry I burnt your book. I don't know what it meant to you. I'd replace it if I could but I can't.'

'Neruda.' Her voice was barely a whisper. 'Pablo Neruda. It was a book of love poetry.' She shut her eyes and sat back.

'Did Dad give it to you?' I kiss the top of her head and leave as she begins to snore.

### **Time for a change**

When I was little and I'd done something wrong – which seemed to happen a lot – my mother would set the oven-timer and wait for me to confess. If I confessed of my own accord, her forgiveness came more easily. If the oven-timer went off before my guilt got the better of me, the punishment would often be disproportionate to the crime. Halfway through our fish suppers the timer goes off and I jump in my chair, trying to work out what I've been caught out doing. It's a Pavlovian response which spans the twenty-five years since I moved to London as if I'd never left.

My mother switches the beeping off and laughs at my expression. 'I've put some sheets to soak out back,' she says. 'Finish your chips.' I can't relax. Dad asks me why I'm so jumpy.

'Is there something you wanted to discuss?' I um and ah and shift in my seat. 'Do you need money?'

'I told you I'm fine at the moment.'

'You're just here for a holiday then?'

'I wanted to see how you were doing.' My mother comes back through, wiping her hands on her skirt. She sits down and sips her water. 'It's been a while. Did you move my bags somewhere?'

'I've put you in your old room,' says my mother. 'I wasn't sure if you'd be bringing a friend, so the double in the spare room is made up too. Just in case.' I chase

the last curl of batter around the plate with my fork. Then I tell them I'm tired from the journey and I'm getting an early night.

Upstairs I stretch out on the single bed, under a curly-edged poster of David Bowie, and listen to my parents watching television in the room below. Eventually they switch it off and I quickly turn out the bedside lamp so that when they pass my bedroom door they won't see a light and come knocking and bothering me. Their footsteps creak along the landing, pause and then continue. I can hear them brushing their teeth. They talk in voices too low to pick out individual words.

I wait for what feels like an hour then I slip off the bed and pad downstairs in my socks. I shut the kitchen door carefully before switching on the lamp on the dresser. I sit down at the head of the table in my dad's seat, and practice. *Come on boy, out with it. You're a real disappointment. When are you going to move back and take over the family business. We all know how badly you're doing down in England. Nobody respects you. What kind of man do you think you are. You can barely support yourself, what are you going to do when you have a family to support. When I was your age I owned my own business.* I speak in a hard whisper, hands on my knees bunched into fists, eyebrows pinching together across my forehead.

I freeze, thinking I can hear a creaking from upstairs but it's just the boiler in the utility room; the central heating must be on a timer. I move along into my mother's seat and put my hands palm upwards on the table, leaning forward on my elbows. *Am I going to live to see my grandchildren. Do you know how much your father worries about you. Why don't you visit more often. Are you happy, are you really happy. I don't think they*



*treat you right at work, what happened to that promotion you were expecting. When we talk on the phone you sound so distant. Are you seeing anyone. You can bring her home, next time. We're always interested to meet new people. I don't care where she's from.*

The chair scrapes on the floor tiles as I move across to my chair. I leave damp handprints on the varnished surface of the table.

In my chair, I struggle to find the right words. I sit with my mouth partly open, running my tongue over my teeth. 'Can't you sleep?' It's my dad in the doorway. 'Something on your mind?'

'Just getting a glass of water.' I follow him up the stairs. He waits outside my room as if expecting me to invite him in. 'Sleep well.'

They sit there the next morning – after I tell them – letting spoonfuls of muesli drop back into their bowls. I hold on to my wrist and massage it with my thumb, waiting for someone to say something in response. Eventually, my dad breaks the silence. 'You're not moving back then.'

'No, I'm staying in London.'

'There are plenty of gay bars through in Edinburgh. We read about them in the newspaper.' I assure him it's not because of a lack of scene. I cite my friends, my job. 'Is this why you didn't get the promotion?'

'No.' I turn to my mother. She's now stirring her muesli thoughtfully. 'Say something.'

‘It took a lot of effort for you to say that, didn’t it.’ She’s smiling, but the hand holding the spoon is trembling. ‘Thank you for being honest with us.’ She turns to my dad. ‘Christopher, can you pass the milk please.’ I tell them I’m going to wash my face. I pause outside the kitchen door, but they’re discussing when the spring bulbs are likely to start, given the frosts.

In the bathroom I lock the door and turn the bath taps on, then I call Benedict on my mobile. ‘I just told them. It went okay.’

‘I’m so proud of you.’ The line is crackly. ‘I’m so glad we can move forward.’

‘Will you look at the list of rentals I left out? We could go to the open viewings next week.’

‘Tell them I’m really looking forward to meeting them. Tell them to come visit us in our new place. We’ll have to find somewhere with a spare bedroom.’ I say I have to go. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t think you’d go through with it.’ I tell him it’s okay.

Down in the hallway I stand with my mother and look at the line of family portraits on the wall. There are no photographs of her, my father or me.

Out back by the fertiliser shed I help my dad heave sacks through the ankle-deep snow and onto the mini-trailer for the pick-up on Monday. Good, manly activity to assert our common ground. Pity I’ve always hated gardening.

‘Your mother has pies for lunch,’ he says. ‘From the bakery.’

‘Is that a new roof on the shed?’

‘I painted the door in the autumn. There were problems with rats.’ It’s a relief to be back to normal. There’s a satisfying rhythm to the work and I find it easier than I remembered. He puts the radio on and we work side by side to *The Week in Westminster* and *From Our Own Correspondent* until my mother calls us in to wash up before lunch.

The kitchen is warm from the cooking. In my reflection in the window I can see that my cheeks are chapped red like my dad’s. I use the small pink, plastic nailbrush in the utility room to get the last of the dirt out. There’s geranium-scented gardener’s hand cream from Crabtree and Evelyn next to the sink and it leaves my hands so greasy I find it hard to turn the round door handle to get back out. When I do I notice that the oven-timer is on but all I think is that it must be for the pies, although I can see them right there in front of me on the table.

My plan was to ease them into it. For their own sake. When your son announces he’s gay in his mid-forties, I thought maybe it’d be easier if they were told it was a recent development. Give them time to get their heads round the idea before being confronted with proof positive. Like a live-in boyfriend. Like a live-in boyfriend less than half my age. My mother cut Benedict off mid-sentence – hanging the phone up – and set the oven timer for an hour. I’ll give her that, she believed in me enough to give me the chance to own up.

After it went off that second time, I can see that it’s just the timer that has been set: the oven itself isn’t switched on. I wonder why my mother has so many sheets to soak. She gets up, taking her half finished plate over to the sink and tipping the leftover

pie into the bin before switching the beeper off. She scrapes the plate loudly, then throws the cutlery into the washing-up bowl and bursts into tears. ‘When did you start lying to me?’ My mother waits by the sink for an answer, then sits down and asks me again. I push a crust to the side of my plate and try to smile.

‘I know this is difficult for you to take in.’

‘My son tells me he’s gay. Fine, I’m happy if you’re happy.’

‘I’ve wanted to tell you for so long.’

‘How long?’ She waves her hand in my father’s direction. ‘He says he didn’t know. I didn’t know. How long have you known for?’

Even if I wasn’t tipped off by the set expression on her face, the atmosphere screams out that this is a trick question. Turns out the real question is, *why give your boyfriend your parent’s home phone number if you don’t want him to call it. Don’t ask your boyfriend to go house hunting so the pair of you can move in together unless you expect him to get over-excited and call your mobile phone ten times but you can’t hear it because it’s up in your old room and you’re outside. But it’s so important that he thinks, well, I know this was just in case of emergencies but this is an emergency because he needs to know if you can take the Wednesday morning off work because that’s when the estate agent has some openings. And, after all, your parents know everything now. Because that was the only condition he gave you about moving in together, that you were honest with them about everything.*

‘You weren’t supposed to find out like this.’

‘How were we supposed to find out? When did this really happen?’ I shrug in what I hope is a placatory fashion. ‘He said you’re moving in together. He invited me to come stay for the house-warming. Who is he?’

‘You’d really like him.’ Even to my ears, it sounds lame. ‘I’ve always known I’m gay, but I’ve only been out since I moved to London.’ She freezes. My father is the first to work out the maths.

‘Twenty-five years?’ I nod. He nods back and that’s that, he and I are back to normal. It’s a liberation and for a moment I can overlook the fact that my mother still hasn’t moved. My chair squeaks against the floor tiles when I stand up to give Dad a hug. I turn and open my arms to her too but she’s gone.

\*

In my room at The Glendower, the socks over the radiator are more or less dried so I move them to the back of the chair, stretching out the soap-washed stiffness of the material at the same time, and put my underwear on to cook instead. The mobile reception in this room is awful. I blame the oak panelling. Finally I find a patch near the window and send Benedict another apology text. I am not expecting a reply. I pad through to the en-suite and brush my teeth, trying to find reasonable answers to the questions I imagine he would be asking, if he were talking to me. *Why are you still there. Don’t you know how important this week was to me. I really needed you there at the gallery opening with me. Have you told your mother she can’t talk to me like that. Why did she say she had no idea who I was. Have you really told them. What’s going on up there. Why haven’t you come back. If you lose your job because of this, who is going to*

*pay the rent on our new place. Have you asked your dad for the deposit money yet.* There are answers, but no opportunity to explain them.

\*

Dad is waiting in the doorway. He still has his slippers on. He tells me she's in the sitting room but that I shouldn't expect too much. He tries to take my case in for me but I tell him I can manage just fine. The pull-out handle comes off as I bump it over the doorstep and one of the wheels comes off too. Then we're laughing, both of us, although it was a bloody expensive piece of luggage and I hope I still have the receipt.

He makes tea and says we can have a look in a minute, he's sure there's something I can use instead. We sit at the table and I ask if my mother has said anything more about the situation and he says no, not really. 'Twenty-five years of silence, that's what she said on Saturday. Tit for tat.' Then he reaches out and pats my hand. 'I'm sure she'll reduce the sentence eventually.' It's hard to stop laughing. After a moment dad joins in. 'What time's your train? I can give you a lift to the station.' I tell him the taxi's booked. On our way upstairs, I poke my head round the sitting room doorway. My mother turns her head away to stare at the fireplace. Neither of us say anything. Dad pulls my arm. 'There's probably something in the spare room cupboard. Come along.' I let him herd me away from her.

From the back of the top shelf my dad pulls down a small, red leather case. 'Nobody will miss this,' he says. 'I don't remember us ever using it. Must have been there for years. Look at this dust.'

'Should we check?'

‘Better not to bother her.’ He takes out a handkerchief and polishes up the brass fittings with a bit of spit. ‘It never hurts to get rid of old baggage.’ We’re off again laughing away, bordering on hysteria.

Everything fits in except my laptop bag. ‘Better to carry it separately anyway,’ dad says. ‘It’ll be lighter for you. Saves your back.’ I put the laptop to one side and take out my cosmetic bag, trying to stop my spare shirt from creasing too badly. Dad advises I roll it rather than fold it and goes to check on my mother.

Smoothing the shirt into the corner, my fingers brush against a small, zipped inside pocket and I both feel and hear the crispness of paper. It’s an envelope. Two envelopes. And a wad of cash. There must be at least a grand. One envelope is handwritten, no address, just two names. *Christopher & Jacob*. My mother’s handwriting. Unopened. The second letter is typed, sealed, stamped and addressed: never sent. The name on the front is Kitty Patterson. I can’t tell how recent it is; my mother’s typewriter broke about five years ago but worked perfectly up until the end. There are low murmurs from the sitting room. I stuff the cash and the letters back in the suitcase. Then I take out the letter marked *Christopher & Jacob*, zip the pocket up, buckle the case up and put it next to the front door. I walk back into the kitchen and wait for my dad to join me.

‘Is there anything you want to tell me?’ Dad looks puzzled at my question. ‘Anything at all. Clear the decks. Tit for tat.’

‘Just that I love you, son.’ I keep looking at him. ‘And I’m sure your mother loves you too.’ I think about the unopened note and I think *well then*. Dad goes into the hallway to call the taxi and I set the oven-timer and go to see my mother.



# 3

## **Erica Writes Her Wrongs**

**Don't, yourself, forget so fast – detective to the last –  
you are not the woman queued at the Post Office  
or the man at his desk emailing workaday quotes;  
even as your fingers type you see the band of white  
which denotes the ring of the royal house now lost;  
or might once have been, or seemed to be, or never was.**

from 'Birthright', Daniel Hardisty

**Puedo escribir los versos más tristes esta noche.  
Pensar que no la tengo. Sentir que la he perdido.**

from 'Puedo escribir los versos', Pablo Neruda

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14 February 2001

Dear Kitty,

Standing in the queue at the village Post Office, who should come in but him. Not that I noticed at first. Not until he had crept up and put a hand on my shoulder. I jumped like a cat in the breeze. How he laughed. Said he had ‘seen me standing there with my head in the clouds’ and ‘couldn’t resist it’.

I am tied to a husband who makes my flesh crawl.

Claimed he was there buying string. I could have said – but didn’t – what business do you have coming all this way to buy string when there’s a perfectly good corner shop much nearer our house. Instead I tucked the parcel under my arm, making sure that the address label was facing inwards. He didn’t ask me why I was in the Post Office when I had said I was only going to the library for a half hour to change my paperback.

That corner shop is so much closer to our home. He will have walked past it to get to the Post Office. Past the window of handwritten notices, the stone dog at the door, all

the way down the High Street. Then followed the curve of the road to the right and up a wee hill. Mind, his knees are not what they once were. Then past the butchers, window full of carcasses. Then in here, ducking low under the stone mantel. It was a bright day outside so he will have had to stand for a moment to let his eyes adjust to the half gloom that comes from keeping shop in somewhere not much more than a basement.

This is why I'm writing to you again, much as I hate to bother you with yet another letter. This one is different though. I'm not going to mention how much I love your books – I've written about them plenty of times before. This time I'm not telling you how much I have to offer, why I think we would be friends. This time I'm asking you for a favour.

Anticipation is so exhausting. Even lying in bed in the morning: the moment I think to myself *I'm going to get up now* I'm paralysed, stuck there for another fretful hour of nothingness and wasting. As every second goes by I feel worse and worse and the task of leaving the sheets seems ever more dreadful. I tell myself *five more minutes then. I must be tired. I must need the rest* but I really know it isn't a needing problem: it's one of deserving.

I'm asking you to help me change this. Just think, you can reach out and touch my life. Doesn't that make you feel powerful?

When Christopher crept up and startled me in the Post Office this afternoon, he didn't ask me why I was there because he wasn't surprised. It was no coincidence. He put his hand on my shoulder and my first reaction was to put mine up to touch the fingers without looking or thinking. Then I turned around and the shock was seeing that it was

my husband. Christopher saw it in my eyes and I saw him seeing. I saw him noting and I thought he must have followed me there and that he really was spying on me this time, shameless and open.

My son has grown up into the shape of Christopher's silences. He doesn't even realise that there are parts of him missing, cracks which should have been smoothed over with the passing of years. I assume that he can't see them in himself since he doesn't try to mend them. You can help my son be whole. Isn't that tempting?

Don't worry, I know you haven't asked for this. You write books which speak to people like me, women like me, who are themselves unspoken. This is a presumption – don't think I'm unaware of it – to enter into a private correspondence when all our dialogue so far has been in the public sphere. You've written books and I've read them, and in that we've each held up our ends of the bargain. But I hope that you will forgive me when you understand that I'm not after you as a real person, I only need you as a writer. However it is that you see the difference between what you write and who you are, please accept that I recognise that difference. I'm not writing to you as someone who breathes, eats, cries, loses their keys or doesn't like the taste of salmon.

I need you to be less than human. This isn't a sob-story.

I want you to ink-up your pen, dust off your notebook, and make this into a whole which is more than the sum of its parts.

Now I've begged your indulgence, let me tell you why. I've given you a small glimpse into how things now stand between my husband and me. Please believe me when I tell you that things weren't always like this.

It's easier for me to demonstrate than to explain. Let me take you back about thirty five years, to the beginning of a story.

\*

Since having endured the birth of our son, we've come to realise the importance of a monthly date-night. We pack the child off to his grandparents for a Friday night. That morning we're smiling at each other over breakfast in a state of anticipation. 'Jacob, have you got clean pyjamas for tonight?' Christopher asks, tousling our son's blonde hair.

'Have you chosen which comics you want to take to Grammy and Grampa's?' I pour milk out of the brown, earthenware jug. Christopher grabs my waist and squeezes. I lean into him, spilling milk onto the tablecloth which I won't even notice until later.

I wave both my boys off at the gate then gather my things and go to work.

There's a note paper-clipped to the library book in my handbag. I find it when I reach the office. *I'm so excited about tonight. I love you so much.* I call my husband on my lunch break. 'Have you made reservations?' I turn coils of the telephone wire round my fingers as I talk. He asks if I've chosen what I'm going to wear. I check that nobody is in ear-shot before I reply.

I'm always home from work first. I clean the kitchen and put the tablecloth in the sink to soak overnight. I check that we have enough bread for tomorrow. There's plenty of time. I go upstairs and have a long bath, reading with my arms stuck up high and

straight out of the water so as not to crumple the pages with steam. I'm sitting at my dressing table twisting up my wet hair when he gets in.

Christopher kisses my neck and the room is full of the smell of turned earth. He takes his bath and I wipe the dirt smudges off my neck with a hand towel and put my make-up on to the sound of him singing.

We've been trying for another child. Christopher has always wanted a big family. The doctor has been reassuring. It can take a while, sometimes. There's no reason to think we can't have more. It is suggested that the changes of having a small child around the house can lead to a delay (he says *changes* but he means *stress*).

'Try to get out more. Relax a little.' He writes notes in cramped, cursive script while the nurse ushers me out: we're prescribed quality time rather than pills.

Walking to the train station, I hold Christopher's hand. The train journey into Edinburgh goes by in a flash. He strokes my hair back off my face and we barely speak.

My pasta is over-cooked, making it easier to spiral onto my fork. I drink my wine too quickly – I can feel the blood rising along the sides of my throat. I prefer white, but it is the gentleman's prerogative to order.

My husband always drinks beer when he's eating Chinese. I can picture the red lanterns in the corner – barely lighting the room – like an open fire.

The candles on the table are almost burnt down by the time I leave. I never dare miss the last train. Taxis are so expensive.

I'm home first. This is usual. The house is quiet without our son and I wander from room to room, checking that all the windows are indeed shut. Upstairs the bed is cold. I wait on my side, knees curled up. After some time I get up and put on a pair of Christopher's socks.

Drifting into sleep, I convince myself that every creak is the rattle of the front door. I wonder if I've put the chain on, by rote, and locked him out.

When he comes in his breath smells of cigarettes. We fuck like strangers. I tell myself I can only smell smoke on him, nothing else. Or that the perfume is unthreateningly cheap.

Afterwards, Christopher tells me what his date looked like. What she wore. I tell him what I talked about over dinner. What I ate.

I don't usually fuck my dates. Sometimes I want to, but there's something shameful about the back-alleys. I never see the same man more than a couple of times. We have long, convoluted discussions about their wives not understanding them. We take a long time to eat our meals. I always have to rush to catch the train; a taxi seems an unnecessary extravagance just for an extra half hour of listening to a man talk about himself.



No more children arrive despite our best efforts to *relax*. Before breakfast, one Friday, I look at my husband in the mirror and suggest that we make some changes and go out for dinner together.

His face is blank. He explains he'd feel like a bastard letting Lizzie down at the last minute (or was it Sophia? Their names don't stick in my memory). I tell him I completely understand and bite back the suggestion we ask the doctor to run more tests – on him this time.

I call my date at lunchtime and tell him I'm feeling unwell. On the train Christopher turns to me and says maybe next month. I tell him whatever he thinks best is fine with me. I smile at him from behind a mask of lipstick and he looks relieved.

Uncertain if my date has cancelled our reservation or found someone else to accompany him, I take myself for a walk in the opposite direction to the restaurant. I sit in a bar and have a beef-burger. This is my first ever meal out in public by myself.

Home before me for a change, my husband has warmed the bed. Lizzie – or was it Sophia? – was a wash-out. He is irritable as we fuck.

Walking up to collect Jacob the next morning Christopher doesn't hold my hand. I ask if we can stop by the library on the way back and he tells me I should stop filling my head with trash.

That summer, I meet André. *Haber gato encerrado en esta situación* is the first Spanish phrase I learn. André says it loudly in my ear and I can smell the coffee on his breath and the brandy in the tray of glasses he is carrying. I am immediately intoxicated. All the

clichés bunch around us that afternoon. The weather so unseasonably hot that my blouse sticks to my back with sweat and I am overwhelmed by the sound of violins tuning on the patio outside. His hands, small and fast, stabbing the air to punctuate his demands then resting a moment too long on my shoulder. I look back as I walk out the door and he is watching me and I thrill and blush like an adolescent. That's how I will come to remember it, the opening chapter of a romance novel. I have been married for eleven years and eleven days and my son is about to turn eight.

\*

You will be curious – I think – about André. I worked for the council offices at the time but most of my days were spent on secondment, helping out at conferences over at the Glendower Hotel. André was just another relative of Maria – the bar manager – over for the summer season. He was young, exotic and gorgeous; there were rumours that he was an exiled poet. I was smitten from the beginning. He told me he had wanted to come to Britain on a quest to find his father, although I don't remember him actually doing anything about that. That he was on a quest was enough for me, at the time.

\*

The soil is parched and a hosepipe ban is announced. Christopher is preoccupied and wilted. I rent learn-at-home Spanish cassettes from the library and stop watching

television in the evenings. When Christopher laughs at my accent, teasing me with fragments learnt from imported seed packets – *estiércol, agua al día, hojas verdes, podar en septiembre* – I buy myself a dictionary.

For as long as I can bear to I keep our trysts to the one Friday a month already allocated for such purposes. It is André who pushes for more. His impatience is infectious. I feel that we are being unacceptably indiscreet in public and cannot understand why we haven't yet been caught. I explain that all we can ever allow ourselves is this once-a-month and he tells me such boundaries are impossible. He reads me poetry he claims to have written himself. He says that to a true poet every moment is a word, every word is a romance waiting to happen. He tells me I am the most beautiful woman he has ever read and describes my walk as poetry in motion (it's even sexier in the original – *poesía en movimiento* – remembering his accent still makes my lips part involuntarily). I promise I will find a way.

It is André who stops me from reading. Years of literary indifference from Christopher have given me my own world to retreat to, undisturbed, when romance dulls into reality and the days become too long. While I reapply my lipstick and try to straighten my hairdo André takes my library book from my bag and begins to read it himself. He stumbles on some words – *tumescant, languorous, sibylline, inconsequential* – and refuses to give the book back. Next time I see him, he demands another. I check my books out and hand them straight over to André, who again complains that our meetings are too infrequent.

Suggesting to my husband that we *relax* more frequently is out of the question. Now that I have nothing to read I start writing, keeping a diary of Christopher's entrances and exits from the family home. Christopher is an unreliable man. Working just up the road at the family plant nursery, he nips back to shower in the middle of the day. He comes irregularly to fetch teabags. My son is also a persistent worry; sent to play at a friend's house he will wander home unannounced. At eight he is already old enough to practise subterfuge.

A Midlothian, middle-aged *deus ex machina*, my boss at the Council gives me license for my desires. As I stop in at the offices to pick up some paperwork, I lean on his desk fanning myself with a pamphlet of Spanish grammar. My boss tells me he wishes to encourage my linguistic ambitions. He thinks I'm gunning for a promotion. There might be an overspill of tourists from Edinburgh at any time wanting to rent out the conference rooms in the hotel. He suggests I ask Maria for some one-on-one tutoring, to pull the burrs out of my voice. Maria is too busy. Her young cousin has time to spare and empty pockets so she suggests him instead. I wonder if she is hinting that she knows, but her face tells no stories. André and I have our sanctified lessons in the hotel bar until Maria decides that we are taking up seats and annoying the customers. We are shooed out of sight into a back room.

The heat continues. Christopher and I send our son to Bournemouth with my father and suddenly all these wee nooks of time just open right up. My husband is off early and home late, working with the sun as usual. I find even more time to steal from unexpected corners of my day. I lie in the unmade bed and watch André reading. He

mouths the words out loud and demands explanations. He cries at the endings. I suggest I read to him or him to me and we have our first fight. He puts my books away and we talk about Christopher and the house and the business and how I need to be rescued.

Unlike everyone else, André doesn't say that my father-in-law is giving Christopher the opportunity to prove himself as a business man by forcing him to stand on his own two feet financially. André says that *tiene más lana que un Borrego* and that nobody from his family would ever hold out on their own flesh and blood like that. He tells me how much respect a woman of letters would have in his family. He tells me about his poetry again. He passes me a bottle of brandy and after I have repeated *da un beso a la botella* five times he teaches me to *da un beso a André*.

After the summer weather fades it is time for André to return home to Spain. 'I will never forget you, Erica.' He weeps into my neck while I rub his back.

'I know,' I say. I give him the latest Mills and Boons – bought with the milk money. I cannot see him off at the airport as I have to take my son into Edinburgh for new school shoes.

There's a secret inside of me that even I do not know. André leaves; his memory is a funnel I pour all my hopes down.

The first Friday after Andre has left, Christopher suggests we go out for dinner. Together. I tell him I have a headache and go to bed early. I have been sleeping badly. I'm so thrown off balance by André leaving that I've been throwing up. Ironically, I'm not the first to realise what is going on. Christopher has an eye for things that grow.

On Monday he comes into the bedroom covered in dew. 'For no reason,' he says, handing me flowers and kissing my forehead. He tells me to take the day off work and rest. He tells me I look tired, all the while smiling broadly and patting my arm.

When Jacob comes home from school at lunchtime and fusses at me, Christopher brings me a cup of tea and sends Jacob down the street to buy sweets. Silenced by an unexpected handful of coppers, my last look at my son's face is marred by his expression of greed.

The smell of the tea makes me gag. My husband already has a cup of chamomile ready. 'I knew it,' he says, pouring the offending cup down the sink. 'You were just the same last time. Why haven't you told me?' I honestly have no idea what he's talking about. He tells me to keep my secrets if I want, smiling and winking. My chest tightens and André's face flashes into my mind.

'No, I haven't been to see the doctor,' I say. Christopher goes to see why Jacob is taking so long. The penny drops and I catch on.

I'm not showing yet. I check my diary but there are so many things I haven't been keeping track of. It is six months after our eleventh wedding anniversary. I've already been doing my research, half-heartedly looking up flight times. Bus schedules. Wondering what I would take and who I would leave behind. I don't have a bag packed and waiting; this has always been a dream rather than a reality but new light has been shed on my situation.

I spend the next two hours writing letters. To work: I'm urgently called away. To my parents: I'm sorry. To Christopher and Jacob: words cannot express my feelings. The

first two I take to post myself. The third I leave on our immaculately made bed. Now that this is happening I realise that I don't need to pack a thing. I probably shouldn't be carrying heavy bags in my situation anyway. Christopher's savings are in the dresser. I take what I think I deserve.

Bus to Edinburgh. They know Christopher at Turnhouse: he is always the one sent in to sign for the special-order seeds and – occasionally – to identify odd roots hidden in suitcases. So – just in case – I take the train to Glasgow and then a plane to Spain.

\*

Writing about it makes my feet twitch for the first time in years. I'm almost inspired to walk out the door right now. It could be so much easier. I could be on a flight to Poland in under an hour. I've never been to Eastern Europe. The anticipation of the effort is all that stops me. I'll stick with trusting you.

I've left the sellotape out, how foolish of me. I must remember to put it away before Christopher comes home. I should check the website to see if anything else has sold.

No, nothing. I'm surprised that fishing rod hasn't shifted yet, it's in excellent condition and it was so expensive when Christopher bought it. There really is no point having all these things cluttering up the attic. I'll email larry77 now and let him know the cufflinks are in the post.

This is the first time I've had a bank account in my name. All the paperwork – the car, the house, the share certificates – are in Christopher's name. We had a joint bank account before I went to Spain. I suppose all the money you make from your writing is your and yours alone? Did you work before you wrote? Are you married? Never mind. Let me tell you about Spain.

\*

André had faithfully promised to write to me and let me know where he was staying. He said there was no point giving me his parents' address in Madrid because there was the possibility of a job in Seville with another cousin. I stood in the hotel bar while Maria polished glasses and told her that I want to write and thank André for all the lessons. I said I had been so busy with Jacob coming back from Bournemouth that I forgot to ask him for his address before he left. She told me he was with his parents in Madrid and I said 'Oh?' and couldn't question it.

My Spanish is not as useful as I had hoped; most of the phrases I learnt from André are not appropriate for everyday use. I resort to showing the taxi-driver the address written in Maria's sloping, foreign capitals and he takes me south out of Madrid and to a greasy-looking suburb.

This is not the place which André had described to me. Or perhaps I had been embroidering it in my head. I show the driver the piece of paper again. He opens the taxi door for me. I step out and square my shoulders to the porch of this new home.



Nothing comes for us in the post from Scotland. No letter from Maria berating her cousin for taking advantage of a married woman. No letter from Christopher begging me to come home for the sake of our son. No letter from my father, scolding me for the shame of it all. It was as if I have never existed before coming into this new climate.

I am a happy woman, growing fat in all the right places and scorching my pink, new skin in sunny Spain. Then I wake up and stand at the bedroom window, stroking my seven-month mound and the strangest thing has happened.

It is raining.

Thin sheets, slicing through the air. The *piso* smells of my morning *magdalenas* and I am craving a cup of tea. André has offered – twice – to buy us a kettle, but I assured him we needed nothing more than an espresso machine just like any other real, Spanish couple (even though the endless cups of *café con leche* gave me headaches for the first few weeks). But my appetite is not entirely mine; this morning there is nothing that will do to settle the baby except for a cup of tea.

Having never had need for one until this point, I have no idea if there is even such a thing as an umbrella in this place. There is nothing in the hall cupboard except for coats, shoes and stacks of old magazines. It is a struggle to fit myself inside to look properly. There is nothing propped in any of the corners of the kitchen, nor the small sitting-room, nor the tiny balcony leading off it. ‘Anita?’ I call for André’s older sister, my head stuck inside our wardrobe. ‘Do you have an umbrella?’ She turns the volume up on the television. I go through and ask her again. The adverts come on and Anita gives a

theatrical sigh, heaving her considerable bulk vertical. I mime ‘raining’ and ‘umbrella’. She glances from the television to my bump and back again, shaking her head. The adverts finish and she settles back down.

Having a chaperone is growing tiresome. If André’s parents knew that I was already married then perhaps they would dispense with this unnecessary formality. I suspect that Anita is as much a spy for her mother as a chaperone for me and her brother. Fortunately Anita’s abhorrence of exertion allows me the freedom I expect. So long as I don’t attempt to change the channel during one of her tele-novellas I could do what I like outside of the *piso*, if there were anything I wanted to do.

Here in Madrid, André’s friends call him Andrò. One of them, Gabriella, calls him Andy. ‘Because of his love for the English,’ she says to me, by way of explanation. I remind her that I am Scottish. She ignores my correction.

Gabriella takes me out for coffee every so often and shows me places. Apparently André doesn’t have any other English-speaking female friends willing to help settle me in. She makes a point of telling me that there are no hard feelings between her and ‘Andy’, despite their history together.

‘What beautiful weather you have here,’ I say. ‘It’s such a treat to be living here with André.’ I tell André I need the practice, speaking Spanish. I ask him to introduce me to some other women. He says yes. The introductions do not happen.

I am planning a trip out of the *piso* this afternoon, shopping with Gabriella. She always tells me I must be lonely not having any family or friends here. The temperature

is dropping daily and last week she said I will need a new coat ‘if I am planning on staying.’

I asked her about English-language bookshops or perhaps a library.

She suggested I try to improve my Spanish ‘if I am planning on staying.’

Since I still can’t understand Anita’s slopping slang any potential friendship is stalled. When André’s parents told us we could have a *piso* of our own in the city I was ecstatic. The provisos were not made clear until we moved in and the spare room was summarily allocated to Anita.

My protests were buried under a flow of reminders that this *piso* was purchased for André’s grandparents. Thanks to my arrival – not to mention the impending arrival of our child – André’s grandparents will not be able to retire this year as intended. The extended family I am still to meet already hates me.

While André is at work packing crates I keep a waiting silence, my tongue wound up on itself. With Anita monopolising the television I begin to read again. The shelves of poetry which André has moved from the tiny bedroom at his parent’s house reveal truths to me. One of these truths is that André has been passing off loose translations of Neruda as his own writing. I don’t tell him I know. Asquerino, Belmonte, Cervantes. Dicenta, Estévez, Felipe. I work my way through the cardboard boxes with my new dictionary open on the table next to the plate of *chorizo* and *pan con mantequilla*.

Everything I own is new. None of my undergarments fit correctly since my body shifts haphazardly and I struggle to make myself understood by the women in the shops. When I read, the voice in my head is accentless.

The shadows under André's eyes grow darker day by day. He says I do not understand politics. He will only talk to me about the books he read in Scotland. That one Mills and Boons has been read so often that the cover has come off. When André discovers me reading Felipe he laughs and slaps me, taking the book off the table at the same time.

'Your Spanish is not good enough.' I don't flinch. He retreats to the sofa with the Mills and Boons.

Although my own money ran out almost as soon as I'd converted it into pesetas, André does not want me to work. I don't have papers. I don't have enough Spanish. There are many excuses. He doesn't want me to come out to the bar with him and his friends.

'We do things differently here,' he says. His black coat makes him look like a crow. 'If you don't like it then leave.'

It was André's mother who first saw why I'd come. She pulled up my cardigan without asking. I didn't understand her Spanish, but I got the gist of it.

The cup of tea I am craving makes me brave the rain outside. I hold my short jacket over my head and run awkwardly on the slippery flagstones. The thin stone streets bounce the rain right back up my legs, soaking the skirt of my dress. The gutters hold the water above ground for as long as possible, making potholes for my shoes. Every passing vehicle adds another layer to my drenching; the thin cotton of my summer dress sticks obscenely to my bump.

There are no teabags in the nearest store. Everyone stares at me. I cross my arms in front of my breasts. When I see Franco's men in uniform choosing bread, I go back out into the rain and start walking home as André has made me promise always to do.

On the way back to the apartment, I have an idea. After shutting the door carefully to avoid upsetting the neighbours, I shout to Anita that I am back. I hang the wet jacket over a stool. Before I change out of my wet things, I sit at the kitchen table and teach myself *La lluvia en España cae principalmente en la llanura* to amuse André in case he comes back to the *piso* for lunch.

I kick my wet shoes off under the table. My legs are clammy.

I'm standing up in the kitchen and peeling off the clammy hosiery when André comes home. He takes one look at me, grabs me by the shoulders and starts shaking.

I think I can hear the baby's teeth rattling.

While he shakes me he shouts in Spanish. I am impressed with how far my comprehension skills have come along. The air feels oddly heavy. I can understand almost everything he says. *My cooking is horrible and bland and nothing like his mother's. I am a burden on him and I ruin his chances of being a real poet. Who can write good poetry with an old woman dragging him down. What kind of woman stands around in wet clothes, oblivious to her unborn child's health? The baby probably isn't even his but he loves it more than he will ever love me. How stupid am I for coming here. Too stupid to even bring books with me. What use am I to him.*

When he lets go of me it is only in order to raise his fists. I throw the dictionary at him. I reach for a cup to throw at him and I remember that I still haven't bought teabags.

This feels like a good time to go out for a walk.

With my hose bunched around one ankle I slip round the table and make it into the hallway, slamming the kitchen door in André's face.

I hold the door shut and explain that I'm going for some fresh air. I tell him there is bread for sandwiches in the fridge.

The hem of my dress slaps against my bare calves as I walk out onto the communal stairway. I'm holding the wet jacket over one arm but I don't remember picking it up.

The door flies open behind me. Next thing I know I'm lying at the foot of the stairs and a doctor is addressing me in broken English. The baby kicks, hard, and I purse my mouth into an *oh* of surprise.

André is in the crowd of people around me, his face yellow and pinched like he is about to vomit. His mother is berating him, telling the doctor what to do and crossing herself.

I allow André's mother to help me back up to the *piso*. She towels me down in my underwear and helps me lie straight on the bed. I start shivering. She strips me naked and covers me with blankets from the wardrobe. I shut my eyes and hear shouting. The television is switched off. The shouting stops. I sleep.

I wake up and think it must be night because it is so dark. Someone has pulled the shutters across the windows. I open them and look outside at the rain.

How foolish I am not to have considered that it could rain in Spain. Oranges must need a lot of water. Watermelons, sunflowers, grapes. The room feels strange. Eventually I pinpoint the strangeness; the television is still silent.

There are voices.

Gabriella and André's mother are drinking coffee in my kitchen. They fuss round me. Gabriella translates for André's mother even though I pretend I can understand her perfectly. They pull me through to the sitting room and pile cushions around me on the sofa. My side is aching like all fury from landing squint on the stairs. I'm wearing André's dressing gown and it smells of his cologne. I am very tired.

'The gist of it,' translates Gabriella, 'Is that you must go.' I shake my head. Not for my sake. Not for the baby's sake. Not for André's sake. I shake my head at all their excuses and press my lips firmly together.

André's mother grabs my hand and starts gesticulating at my fingers. 'You should find a decent English man and make a family with him,' says Gabriella. 'In England.' André's mother nods her head vigorously.

'Scotland,' I say, automatically.

'*Inglaterra*' she says, with satisfaction. 'Go home.'

'You don't know how to handle Andy,' says Gabriella.

'André.' I say. His mother waves my hand at me again, holding my ring finger.

'His father was like this too,' Gabriella says. 'That's why they left him in England and came back to Spain. She knows what she's talking about. If he hits you once, he'll do it again.'

‘If he can’t change, why do you want him?’ I ask. Gabriella ignores me. André’s mother shrugs at Gabriella. Gabriella goes back through to the kitchen. When she returns, she is holding a gold locket on a thin gold chain.

‘His father,’ she says, holding it out to me. My hands are shaking. Gabriella has to open the locket for me. ‘André was five when they left him.’

There’s nothing remarkable about the small, black and white picture of a young man with a moustache in the locket. The other photo I recognise as a younger version of André’s mother.

André’s mother stabs at the photo of the man with her finger, then shakes a fist at it. ‘Bad man,’ she says. She knocks the fist into the cupped palm of her other hand. ‘Bang.’

‘I thought you didn’t speak English,’ I say.

‘Go home *Inglaterra*,’ she repeats.

‘André does not love you, Erica,’ says Gabriella. ‘What are you here for?’

‘I need the bathroom,’ I say. I stand up. This is when I see the small, red suitcase tucked behind the sofa. Gabriella follows my gaze, gets up and pulls it out. There are my clothes, neatly folded. A small toiletry bag I do not recognise. A brown paper parcel. I pick up the parcel and feel it. There’s a dampness in one corner of it, seeping through the waxed paper.

‘Your shoes.’ says Gabriella. ‘You’ll have to travel in the sandals.’

There’s a note on top of a pristinely folded blouse. André’s handwriting, one word – considerably written in English. *Goodbye*.



I never saw André again. I'll skip over the next bit; how it was still raining as Gabriella drove me to the airport; how I made her stop and go back for André's copy of Neruda, hidden in the hall bench along with the other forbidden things; how I took one last look at the low, grey Spanish sky before limping into the terminal thinking, *ah well, back I go then*; how I picked the name of an agency at random from the telephone book when I landed in London; how they sent a taxi to collect me and my blood-red suitcase; how my toes were purple by the time I reached the establishment for unmarried mothers, the matron glaring at my open-toed sandals and sucking her teeth.

\*

My feet feel cold now, writing about it. I can't remember the last time I wore heels; there's a bunion on my right foot which precludes anything dainty.

This isn't stealing. I always meant to ask his permission about the things in the attic. To begin with it was only a few things of mine I knew I'd never need again like all the baby equipment. I put the money by for another rainy day. Then the pram went and behind it there was a stack of old fishing books he hadn't looked at in years.

I got fifty pounds for them. I used some of it to buy Christmas presents for the family. It's a large attic. There are so many corners. Most of it is un-saleable. I only managed to get rid of the pram by listing it as collect-only and taking the risk. Christopher would be out when the buyer arrived.

The cufflinks – the ones Larry77 bought yesterday – were just lying there, covered in dust. He never uses them. They didn't look all that expensive but I checked the hallmark and polished them up and you would be shocked to know how high Larry77 was willing to bid. Christopher told me years ago that they had belonged to his uncle who died in the war.

Dusty, empty spaces opening up in the attic and now a dusty, empty place in one of the drawers of Christopher's desk. I was looking for his Will when I found them. It was curiosity, nothing more sinister. I don't have a Will; I suppose nobody ever thought I had anything worth leaving to someone else. I just wanted to know what one looked like.

Instead I found the cufflinks. The Will must be lodged with his solicitors after all. They weren't even in a box, just rattling around at the back of a drawer. He had probably forgotten they were there. There were other things too; an old pocket-watch, some tie-pins. I'd sell *my* jewellery if I had any that wouldn't be missed.

Where was I? London, in the brown hallway of the home for unmarried mothers. Clutching the red suitcase awkwardly in front of my swollen stomach and shivering.

\*

She is a girl. The labour is short. I'm still off-it from the gas when her parents come in for their first look. 'Can I visit her?' I ask.

'We'll sort the paperwork tomorrow.' The nurse rubs my hands while they feed her from a bottle and I am told to go back to sleep.

When they put the papers in front of me the next day I start signing straight away. The woman snatches each signed sheet and holds it on her lap.

‘You can write.’ The woman looks away when the man speaks.

‘Will she get the letters?’ I ask. The man and woman look at each other.

‘Maybe,’ says the woman.

‘Yes,’ says the man. I stop signing.

‘She doesn’t need to know she’s adopted,’ says the woman. ‘It’s clearly for the best.’

‘I don’t want her to know,’ I say. ‘It’s not like I’m her real mother.’ The woman smiles. The man frowns.

‘You might change your mind,’ he says. I agree and stare out the window. There isn’t much of a view; new, grey buildings. No birds. I can hear the hum of a heating unit and the tap of the woman’s foot on the floor.

Matron comes back in holding the birth certificate, followed by a nurse with a tea-tray. ‘Have we finished signing everything?’ Matron asks, eyeing the remaining sheet in front of me. I shake my head.

‘Can I see her again?’ I ask.

‘We don’t advise it,’ says Matron, handing the birth certificate to the man. The woman is glaring at her husband.

‘We agreed,’ she says to him. ‘We’re not telling her.’

‘When she’s old enough to understand,’ the husband says to me. ‘We’ll give her your letters.’ I lower the hand holding the pen back to the paper. There’s a dot where I lifted it off before.

‘If it seems appropriate,’ says the woman. I lift the pen.

‘How old?’ I ask. The husband and wife look at Matron. She turns her back and starts pouring tea.

Husband and wife open their mouths at the same time but neither of them say anything. They’re looking at each other, calculating.

‘Marilyn?’ he tips his head at her, giving her the chance to go first. She doesn’t take it. ‘Sixteen?’ he says. She doesn’t contradict him. I put the pen back down to the dotted line.

‘Will you send me photographs?’ I ask.

‘No,’ Marilyn says. I nod. I sign. Marilyn snatches the sheet of paper away and adds it to the others.

It’s like a fairytale. Except rather than Sleeping Beauty falling into an enchanted sleep at the age of sixteen that’s when she’ll wake up.

The money has been sitting on Marilyn’s lap the whole time. She hands the brown paper bag to Matron. Matron counts it and passes it on to me. It is warm. The promise could be no more than a puff of air, there is no written contract. The husband scribbles a surname and an address down for me and hands it over. I add it to the bag of cash without looking at it.

I do not see the baby-girl being taken away. Matron feeds me tea and congratulates me on making the right choice. 'The bed is paid for until the end of the week,' she says, pausing the china tea-cup just below her lips. She holds it there, watching me, until I nod. She smiles and sips, pinkie finger held at an angle. I look back out of the window. I watch the clouds dissolving.

The timetable posted up at the tube station is unhelpful; it doesn't list details of the trains which won't be stopping here.

The cash in my handbag is intended as compensation for whoever is driving the train. There's note to that effect paper-clipped to it. There's no colour left in the world.

It's too busy; I can't do it with all these people watching. They make me nervous. I'm rocking on my heels by the white line at the edge of the platform and I'm scared they'll run forward and try to stop me. I take the next tube to King's Cross.

While Plan B had been to slip under a stationary train and wait for it to move, that doesn't work either. I'm still carrying my red suitcase and porters keep trying to lift me onto a train.

I buy a ticket so that I have something to wave in the faces of people asking how they can help me.

A porter gives me his hand to help me step into the carriage. Plan C becomes throwing myself out of the train once it has built up to full speed.

The train guard wakes me up when we reach Edinburgh. ‘Your bag,’ he reminds me, handing the red leather suitcase down to me. I stand on the platform, watching the train pull away. It’s dark here.

\*

This is ridiculous. I can’t believe I’m crying. It’s only a memory.

\*

As I unlatch the gate leading to the house in which I used to live it occurs to me that it is exactly a year to the day that I left. The taxi drives off. There’s a magic at work here, like the wrong passing of time in a fairy tale. Everyone may be locked safely inside, still under the spell of sleeping, not even noticing I have been gone. The street is quiet. Nothing looks different. Maybe one thing – the path looks like it has been weeded. I wonder if the paint round the windows is new, it is hard to tell with the streetlights so far away. I walk up and touch it, feeling familiar dents in the windowsill. There’s a flake of paint at the edge. I stand there and pick at it.

Having never planned to come back, I’m uncertain what to do next. This isn’t a fairy story after all. I am not long-lost, I am long-left. The kitchen blinds are pulled down so I can’t see in but there’s light at the edges. It occurs to me that Christopher may have

moved. Or that another woman might be standing in my kitchen soaking oats for breakfast.

Jacob might be dead. The thought comes into my head from nowhere and I wonder what right I have to care. I wonder if I do care. Since I left Spain it has been hard to care about anything.

I'm walking away from the house. I have plenty of money in my bag; a hotel is possible. Going to my father's tomorrow is possible. I unlatch the gate again walk through and trip over the suitcase.

I cry out although it didn't hurt. The surprise fades quickly. I kick the suitcase softly at first – something to do to pass the time while I decide where to go next.

Inspiration does not strike. I kick the suitcase harder. I kick it hard enough that it lands in the road. I walk over and kick it back onto the pavement, kick it so that it bounces off the low stone wall. Kick it so hard that the catch flies open.

I'm crouching over the open suitcase when the quality of the light around me changes and I realise that someone has opened the kitchen blinds. I press down in front of the wall, putting one hand up to smooth my hair down and using the other to keep my balance. The edge of the suitcase cuts into my collarbone. There's a shoe and a tangle of hosiery in front of the gate and the unreadable Neruda.

The light dims. I breathe again. I stretch my arm out and pull the shoe and the tights towards me. I rest for a moment clutching the shoe in my hand. Then I hear a scraping and I know that sound intimately buried in my memory from my old life. I shut my eyes and curl as close to the suitcase and the gritty pavement as I can. I picture the

front door opening. I cannot picture who peers out, whose footsteps come halfway down the path and stop. What faceless person sighs, what faceless person walks back inside. Shuts the door. Turns the key in the lock. I imagine I can hear the key being hung on the hook just inside the small cabinet on the left. The cabinet door being shut. Steps receding into the house.

I don't get up for some time.

The light round the edge of the kitchen window is out. I put my clothes back into the case without folding them and have to sit on the lid to help the catch shut. I do all of this slowly and quietly. I stop often to look at the blank, dark windows of the house. Once I'm finished I stay sitting on the suitcase and think about nothing at all for a while.

Curiosity – more than anything else – makes me creep up and look under the flowerpot by the door. The spare key is still there. I turn it over in my fingers, it's cold. I bring the suitcase from the gate up to the front door, setting it down on the mat as gently as possible.

Inside the hallway I remember that it is necessary to keep breathing. There's plenty of moonlight coming in through the glass panels round the door so I can see that there's nothing here to knock into or fall over. It's unnaturally clean for a house with a child in it. There are no spare toys, no discarded shoes. The pushbike is no longer propped under the coat rack. The coat rack is empty. I ease my shoes off and pad on my toes through to the kitchen. Once the kitchen door is shut I put my hand out – trusting to instinct – and switch on the light.



On first glance everything is the same. I switch back the bowl of fruit from the kitchen table to the sideboard next to the refrigerator where it belongs. I put the suitcase out of the way in the awkward gap next to the vegetable rack.

There's a pile of open post on the table. I leaf through the envelopes, reading Christopher's name over and over. The chair scrapes on the tiles as I pull it out. I sit with the letters in front of me and both hands pressed over my heart – which is jumping up in my throat. I wait for it to pass, telling myself I'll have a glass of water in a second.

Children are so light; I don't hear Jacob coming down the stairs at all. With the blood rushing in my ears I barely hear the door open. The movement catches the side of my eye and then the small, round face of my son is staring at me.

We do not rush into each others' arms. My breasts ache and I try to remember when the milk pads are due to be changed. Jacob looks around the kitchen slowly, assessing every corner. I stay as still as possible. He steps a little inside the kitchen so that he can peer behind the door properly. I push the envelopes away along the table with my fingertips.

Cautiously, I stand up and go to the sink. I take a glass from the draining board and fill it with water. I return to my seat. Jacob stays where he is.

There's a lump in my throat. I mis-swallow and end up coughing. Jacob takes a step backwards, half disappearing behind the door. I attempt another sip but my throat is too raw. I put the glass down on the table.

Footsteps upstairs. Jacob and I look at each other – look up – lock eyes. He raises a finger to his lips. I nod.

A toilet flushing. Heavy footsteps. A pause. I think we're safe so I smile at my son. I'm about to speak – to offer to make him a hot milk to help him sleep – but Jacob is frowning. He comes fully into the kitchen and turns to face the hallway. The heavy footsteps turn into the *knock, knock, knock* of someone descending the stairs.

'Back to bed. Now.' Christopher's voice shocks me by sounding exactly the same. I stand up obediently before I realise that he can't see me: he only sees the small figure of our son blocking the kitchen doorway.

Jacob doesn't look at me. He puts his hand up to reach the light switch but Christopher beats him to it. I know it's his hand because I've just heard his voice, but I wouldn't have recognised it otherwise. It's just a hand. It is just a disappointing hand. André's wrist has thick curls of dark hair pushing out of his sleeves. His thumb is long but his fingers are short and square-tipped. I know I will recognise André's hand in any context at any moment for the rest of my life.

I'm fantasising about my ex-lover when my husband turns the light off and leaves me in the dark. The kitchen door closes with a click. I feel caged, and put a hand out to locate the glass of water to reassure myself that I know where it is so that I won't knock it over by mistake during this confinement.

Now that I know to listen for it I can hear Jacob's pitter-patter up the stairs. Christopher doesn't follow him. I picture him stopping to look at himself in the hall mirror in the moonlight. He has always been vain so I'm not surprised he stands there for so long.

‘Erica?’ Christopher’s voice is hard to read. I wonder if I’ve imagined it. I wonder if I’m dreaming right now but make no move to pinch myself. The kitchen door opens but the light is not switched back on. My eyes are still blinking white spots under the lids.

‘You’re back.’ It is not a question. I don’t know how to respond – my lips won’t move. My hands are shaking too much to pick up the glass of water.

The air moves and Christopher is stepping into the kitchen. He walks past the table to the window. The blinds roll up with a clatter of bamboo and he is silhouetted by moonlight.

‘I’m sorry’ I try to say, unable to force out more than a hissing whisper. In the still, waiting kitchen it feels like I am shouting. I don’t know if I’m articulating properly, my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth and clicks. Christopher stays standing with his back to the window.

‘We’re moving tomorrow,’ he says. I wonder if any of the letters on the table could have told me that. I wonder if I’d still be sitting here if Jacob hadn’t come downstairs. I wonder if Christopher still keeps his wages in the dresser drawer.

Having never scripted a return to this man, this house, I am without a fantasy to follow. In the blanket of the dark I itemise my own changes; the hair cut back above my shoulders. The new skirt. My coat is city-thin, cheaply lined. The skin still loose above my hips. If Christopher turns me away I don’t know where I might end up.

He does not turn me away. We go upstairs in silence, passing my tell-tale shoes in the hallway. There are unbounded possibilities, unfolding in my mind with every step.

But Christopher doesn't set me free; he lets me back into my cage. I hop as freely as any little bird tired of flying into the wind.

The next morning I sit drinking tea while Jacob empties the fridge and Christopher fetches the moving van. I miss the taste of coffee.

\*

That's it. There you go. Done and dusted. Take these bare bones and cover them with whatever you need to get it up and walking. Give it some legs.

What happened next?

Nothing.

\*

It never ceases to amaze me how much two people can talk without saying a thing. I pass the milk. I collect our son from school when Christopher is held up with deliveries. I agree that the rain is good for the bulbs. I say I'd like a new apron for Christmas. I wait to be asked what has happened. I wait to tell Christopher – anyone – where I've been. His hand on my hip with the bedside light on; are his fingers tracing question marks over the silver traces on my skin? *No sentimos nada*. I do not ask Maria to resume my language lessons.

Days fly into patterns and months follow suit. Calling to see if I can get my job back, I find that some doors do not re-open. The right of the survivor is to tell the history of the battle. I do not want to take that away from Christopher. I feel like a stranger in my own skin, aging at a different rate. My heart is lost in an unknown void and when I open my mouth to ask for help only my breath comes out. Words are empty.

Silence is exhausting.

\*

I'm certain that you understand what I was going through, what I'm still suffering from. You complete me just by reading this scrawl. There is nothing so imperfect as a piece of writing which isn't read. Nothing quite so heartbreaking.

\*

We never speak about my year away; Christopher never asks me a single question, never demands an explanation. The closest we come is a few days after moving into the new house when I am still in bed trying to sleep off the travelling. Christopher is up and about with the dawn, waiting for the builders to come finish the office extension. He is excited about this new venture and wants me to help out with the administrative side of things.

Christopher dresses in the dark while I pretend to still be asleep. I haven't unpacked either my old or my new things and he has to negotiate cardboard boxes and

drapes of fabric. All of his clothes are hanging in the built-in wardrobe. He had already packed my old things when I returned. I haven't asked if he was planning on unpacking them here. I haven't asked when exactly he packed them up.

My library books have been kept rather than returned. The fines must be monumental – I'm too ashamed to return them. One night I sneak out and bury them along with the book of Spanish grammar. Then half an hour later I go back and retrieve the grammar because it cost quite a lot of money. I leave the library books there to pulp and mulch into the rose bed in the deep part of the roots where nobody normally digs.

I should have died on the train tracks rather than come back to this life-in-death. More poetically, I should have died in childbirth. I forget that I have recently given birth until it is time to change the pads in my bra. Now that I know he is alive and healthy, Jacob is not as interesting as I thought he might have become in my absence.

I'm still pretending to be more asleep than I am. Christopher pauses over me as if about to kiss my cheek. He puts something on the bedside table – there's a rustle-scratch of paper – then he's gone.

Propped on my elbows I turn on the lamp and have a look. I'm expecting it to be housekeeping money but it's my letter. Still sealed. The letter I wrote to Christopher and Jacob when I left. I check for signs that it may have been steamed open. Not for the first time I wonder where I am supposed to have been for all this time. Perhaps he has been saving it for when Jacob is old enough to ask more insistent questions. Or for a divorce hearing.

Eventually I conclude that he has saved it on the off chance that I would return – as I have – so that he can humiliate me through this display of indifference.

Having already left once I can't summon the energy to do so again. Without the drive and determination of a destination there doesn't seem to be much point.

Time rolls on. Beyond the occasional reference to 'when you had your trouble', nobody in the village mentions my absence. I deduce that they have been told that my parents were ill and I went to care for them but that they secretly think I *had an episode*. Several people know about my mother's medical history so I can see where they traced their little fantasies.

There's an extra humiliation. I have been braced for what seems to me inevitable gossip about André. Sly pokes about my language skills, that kind of thing. But it seems that nobody has made the connection between him returning home and my sudden disappearance.

That it is easier to believe I am mentally unbalanced than attractive to a handsome young foreigner stings. I persuade myself that Maria is not as friendly as she used to be. I decide that it is her fault I cannot get my old job back.

The doctor treats me for a chest infection. By then my breasts are almost back to normal, dried up from lack of demand. He doesn't mention Christopher and my past attempts to conceive or talk to me about the need for quality time.

Freedom is a quality of the mind fed by want not need.

The old dresser has moved to the new house with us. Once I have finished unpacking I put the unopened note in the red leather suitcase and stash it in the spare

bedroom cupboard. I put the money from the sale of my daughter in the drawer of the dresser. Debts should be repaid.

I do not write to my daughter. There is nothing to say. I burn the address.

My André was a great one for reading. That's a gift I treasure. I have it in my mind that we might be reading the same book – the same page even – at the same time. It's a dirty thrill. I have come to the conclusion that one step better than this would be for him to read about me.

It is within the realms of possibility that André has been desperate to contact me. He may regret letting me leave. He might have been writing to me for years. Christopher might have been in the post office this afternoon to intercept yet another of his letters.

Maria moved away years ago. I would not have put it past her to have colluded with my husband in keeping André and I apart. André's mother will have been a key player in this game.

He will be curious about our daughter. I hired a private investigator a few years ago, but didn't have the money to pay his extortionate fees back then so I don't know if he found anything. Christopher stopped keeping the money in the dresser and opened a bank account when Jacob grew old enough to steal.

Here's where you come in. A book by Kitty Patterson gets a lot of exposure. I happen to have noticed that Spain is one of your key markets. When you write and publish my account – I expect nothing more than a reasonable share of the profits, incidentally, just enough to help with my expenses for the move back to Spain – then it is



bound to be read by someone who knows André. The story will ring a few bells; someone will make a call and André will read it for himself.

His desire to find his daughter – if not his desire to find me – will kick-start a chain of events which will bring him back into my life and we can live happily ever after. Fairytales are not just for the young.

Jacob is old enough to look after himself. He will no doubt soon announce that he is getting married and taking over the family business, then the sum total of Christopher's ambitions will be complete. The two of them can keep each other company and I can escape this insipid existence.

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Warmest regards

# Epitaph

**No matter how busy you may think you are, you must find time for reading, or surrender yourself to self-chosen ignorance.**

Confucius

The bus lurches around another corner and my hand grips the pole tighter, the white knot of the scar standing out against my tan like a saltire. You are – to me – a solid, living thing. A doorway to the past that will not close: your foot wedged in the gap, your fingers gripping the jamb. I picture those fingers as long, thin, blue and icy. Sure, they're the hands of Jack Frost.

The armpits of my t-shirt are wet and I'm going to stink by the time I get there. This jacket – my only good suit, bought in the winter – leaves me dripping. Ridiculously crowded in here it is. I swear – and this time I truly mean it – I'm moving out to the countryside as soon as my lease runs out even if I bankrupt myself in the process. If that woman grabs the strap from my bag rather than bracing herself with something the bus company provided for the occasion one more time I'm going to grab back and see how she likes it.

The inside of the windows are slimy with condensation. I can feel the bus slowing. I hope I'm right that this is my stop. The huffing closeness of all these strangers presses on my mind. Through the fogging glass I can see a row of boarded-up shops. I line my lips against each other and hold my breath. There's the church, right enough. You are a memento of the unseen child my wife rocked as she held herself and leapt.

The crowd shudders around me and the bus stops. I hustle through the press of pink, sweaty people and out into a caress of fresh air.

According to the clock-face on the side of the church I'm early. I stop by a graffiti-enhanced fence, unstrap the bags and remove my jacket. I hold my arms out at right angles, giving myself a proper airing before I'm forced to re-dress.

Crouching down, I pretend to tie a shoe lace and take a surreptitious sniff at my armpits, checking that I'm not unacceptable. The sweat is bound to have ruined my hair

but – hell – what can I do about it now. Everyone else will be creased from the heat. Apart from direct family as I assume the hearses will be air conditioned.

Despite the best efforts of the fingering public, my equipment is still intact. My hands leave damp prints on the leather cases. I haven't brought tissues with me. I meant to pick some up on the way. I can't see any shops near here. When I think of you – and I think of you often – my bones hurt. The weariness fills the air with dust and I worry that one day I will stay locked in this crypt of thoughts and never escape. If there was some road to leaving you then I would run down it and never look back.

Mam was crying so hard when she called that I thought it must have been one of my nephews who'd pegged it. I sat on the kitchen floor and held the receiver as tightly as a lifebuoy.

'Who?' I kept asking while mam kept crying. 'Who this time?'

'That author, son. Murdered'

'Not Danny? Not Jackie?'

'It's like me arm's gone.'

'Jesus, mam. You never met the woman. Don't take on so. Is the nurse with you?'

She handed the phone over and Sister Luisa and I discussed appropriate dosages of medication for half an hour.

The second call came later that afternoon and that one I was expecting, waiting for even.

'What've you got for me, Dougie?' My foot spells out percussive impatience on the floor tiles, edgy from Mam's call.

'Glamour and a cheque or a private gig for cash in hand.'

‘Names?’

‘Need-to-know only.’

‘Sure then, I’ll take the cash.’

He gave me the particulars and I did some basic addition.

‘Kitty Patterson is it?’

‘Clever boy, Daniel. See you’ve been watching the news today. Were you a fan?’

‘Give me mam half a chance and she’d be at the funeral herself.’ She would and all. She’d have that drip out of her arm and be halfway down the street in a wheelchair if the nurses didn’t keep her strapped in. Literally strapped in. I asked them about it and they said she knew it was for her own good.

It’s a double-agent that I am today, earning myself some fat cash and representing mam’s grief. I can see through to the graveyard here, most of the headstones have been pushed over. I’m sure I read somewhere that councils aren’t allowed to put them back up – health and safety and all that blether. Why they don’t just lay the new ones down flat to begin with – cut out the vandal middle-man – that’s what I want to know. This long distance lens is still stiff, I know I shouldn’t have bought second-hand.

Time to head round the front. The sweat patches in my pits have gone cold and clammy and putting this jacket back on is fair disgusting and halfway to degrading. The air is so dry all I can taste is exhaust fumes and I just bet that everyone round here grows up with carbon monoxide poisoning. The location really isn’t what I was expecting. The old lady made quite a lot of money from what I’ve read, she must want to be buried here

for sentimental reasons. Or her heirs are total skinflints and didn't want to spend a penny more than necessary on the aftermath of death. And don't we just know about that, you and I. Flowers. New clothes. Casket. Plot. Fees. Bleeding money through your nose and feeling like shit for noticing.

No sign of a crowd. Maybe there is air conditioning in the church after all and everyone is waiting inside. I wish I'd known. The doors are shut, strange. Shut and locked. Here's the name of the church, St. Lawrence, same as on my brief. Did I get the time wrong? If I've missed it then that's the gas bill unpaid again.

Right on time. Five minutes early even. Those doors are definitely locked. I knock, but there's no answer.

Half of a family are laying flowers; two small kids sticky with tears and a worn-out woman in a floral skirt and pale pink top. The stillness around them is wrapped like a shroud. They're the only people around. I approach them with my hands held open and my head tilted to one side. If they've buried someone here, chances are they've some local knowledge.

'Is there another entrance? For a funeral and that?' I address the woman but she doesn't meet my eye. She shakes her head. She's what mam would call *fey* looking; overly pale with wispy, white-blond hair. Not a looker.

'This is St. Lawrence's?' I look through my scribbled notes on the brief. 'St. Lawrence-in-the-fields?'

Now she smiles, but there's no humour in it. 'Across town, that is,' she says, twisting her hair between bone-white fingers. The children droop around the grave behind her, picking dead flowers out of fading arrangements.

I ask for directions to the nearest taxi rank.

‘It’s not a taxi kind of place round here.’ Her smile melts into an open sneer. She chews her hair.

Apologising for disturbing her, I turn back towards the road where – chance beyond fortune – a taxi driver is in the process of helping an elderly couple out of a cab and into a wheelchair. I shout and sprint. Glancing back, the faded woman is watching me. Her view of the road behind me was unimpeded the whole time. Her face is unreadable.

The taxi driver is in a garrulous mood. He laughs at my mistake and assures me he’s never heard the like. I agree that I’m not from round here. He pauses for a respectful if all too brief moment when I explain why I’m off to church on a fine day like this. Then he rattles back in with the questions, answering them himself if I’m too slow in opening my mouth

The ride can’t have been more than seven or eight minutes but by the end of it I feel flayed and exhausted. I step out into a different kind of street; more boutique and coffee shop than tanning salon and takeaway. Still too urban for my taste, but we can’t all live on a farm. Just picture it, sitting in a field with bare feet refreshing in a stream. Learning to fish or reading poetry or just soaking up the birdsong. As soon as I have enough saved up. And you’ll never be able to follow me there. I’ll find somewhere remote and rural you can’t exist in.



Fifteen minutes after the service should have started, I am standing by the unlocked doors of St. Lawrence-in-the-field. I will wait. There's something about seeing the dirt piling on top of the coffin flips most people out. Makes for a better photograph.

Nobody likes to ask the same question twice. This could be a blessing in disguise. If anyone asks who I am or otherwise indicates an awareness of my fraudulent presence graveside, I can just apologise for my lateness. That's what they say in my line of work, like a mantra: *don't hide, blend in*.

Folded up behind the tripod extension is my background file. The paper this morning said the trial starts next week. Kitty Patterson, best known for her controversial book *A Mother's Trial*, which was rumoured to have been non-fiction and covered up by a court case. Her reputation never looked back, she became a total chat-show babe and was widely credited with re-inventing both the romance and the misery memoir genres for the early twenty-first century. Well done Kitty Patterson. Seventy three books. Pity some crazy Scottish woman assassinated you live on *Oprah* last week.

The music rises. Here comes the money. I'm glad hats are out of fashion: nothing obscures a face quite like a wide brim. No sunglasses either, so none of her chat show mates counted as close friends and family. Thirty people, by my guess. All in black, so they're traditionalists. And those men carrying the coffin are hired hands or I know nothing about the service industries. Timing is everything. Count to ten and walk in behind them. The scar on my hand itches and I shove it deep in my pocket to stop me from scratching it. You know why.

We wore sky blue for Maggie. Every last person in the hall – blue ties, blue hats, blue skirts, blue socks, blue shoes. You sat in my seat with me, blocking my throat and filling my stomach with ice cubes. Blue eyes, blue veins, blue skin, blue mouth. I stood up to speak and the faces blurred into a blue sea.

When the priest refused to bury a suicide I swore I'd never enter a church again. Which was a lie. I swore it loudly and often and to everyone who'd stop and listen. I pulled some strings and the local papers were there at the memorial hall with sharp pencils and full heads. There was even a piece on the news; my colour florid against the wedding-cake jacket, my voice stammering and shouting alternately.

Maggie chose the colour. Blue for a boy. There was a list left behind; proof positive for the police that it was a premeditated act. That we were to wear sky blue. That there should be live music afterwards and dancing. That it was to be a celebration of the life before. That nobody was to speak of unmentionable things or of sadness. Even then mam was looking too blunt around the face. We looked inside and saw our own pain and looked at her slack arms and told ourselves that the weight loss was from grieving.

The line stops by the dug earth and there's a small confusion about how close the mourners want to come to the edge. Sure, there's money to be made in a book that guides a person through this kind of event, better still a website. Maybe I can run it from my cottage in the country; what flowers to bring, what colours to wear. Three more jobs at the full rate and I could get a car and commute. My lease doesn't run out for another five months. If I get lucky I could be a paid-up, card-carrying ex-townie by the new year. A

buy-out, not a sell-out. Might even have enough to get something for mam, a couple of extra years treatment. Or a quieter ending. It'd be her choice – that would be the present really – giving her back some choice in the matter. Re-focus.

I'm not alone here. These grave faces are not all strangers; I know three faces in this crowd already and I know they've clocked me in return. Her over there, she's looking at everyone's shoes, not the grave. That older lady right on the edge by the vicar, she's dabbing at her eyes but she isn't crying. Takes one to know one. Jesus it's hot out here. I'll be glad to get back into a pair of shorts, go out for a lemonade. Kick back and relax for the evening. Breathe without choking on my own sweat.

The ongoing *chuk, chuk, chuk* of the spades reminds me that six feet of dirt is a lot to dig through. It's almost drowned out by someone sobbing. I try to raise my eyes to see who's losing their cool so shamefully in public, but my eyes are too hot and too heavy to raise up and they're tipping out. Then I realise the pain in my throat unfolding and burning and it's me who is keening by a stranger's graveside.

Friends and family crowded round and laid their hands on my blue sleeves and padded shoulders. What was done was finished and unremarkable for everyone apart from us. After the memorial, everyone else began to forget. But Orpheus must look back and Eurydice must be lost forever. You were always there, ready to ambush my future. Cold fingers trailing down my spine on hot afternoons. Grabbing my sleeve in crowded places and spinning me round. Making me remember her face. Thin violet skin under her eyes, pupils dilated. Unwashed hair. Over-bitten lips.

The day I shouted at her. The day she leapt: *I was at the end of a non-umbilical tether. My sleep had been sparse for several weeks.* I have a list of excuses other people kept trying to spoon feed me.

Our baby died in her womb. Late. Too late. There was a funeral cortege of a delivery; the midwife's hands came away bloody and her face creased into sallowness and I turned and walked out of the hospital. My older brother found me at the airport – he and Sheila had just moved back down South and he had all this time on his hands to follow me around it seemed. I don't know where I thought I could go. I came back with him. He told our family I was in the park, staring at the ducks. There are always complications.

We came home newly empty. Childless. Maggie kept waking me in the middle of the night, asking me to stop the baby crying. Her breasts lactated continually, drenching through the pads by lunchtime. Her stomach filled with phantom breath and stayed swollen. The doctors prescribed time. Then tranquillisers.

The flowers tipped me over. Not the first few deliveries – she hid the notes – but they kept coming and kept coming and I called the florist. Maggie was still telling people she was on maternity leave. She'd named him, *Ethan Drake*, and emailed photos to friends back in Ireland. I don't know who the child in the photos was or where she'd sourced them. Photographs are about capturing memories, moments, and bringing out things from under the surface. It was a kick.

I told her I couldn't stay and then I couldn't make myself leave. She left instead. One glorious, triumphant leap and our penthouse flat was back to being a bachelor pad.

Did you watch her jump? How else can you show me those images I know I never saw – her hair like weeds in water flying out behind as she fell. Eyes closed in a smile. Arms cradling memories close to her chest.

Next to me, an older man reaches out and places heavy fingers on my wrist. I feel that we're fusing together; one solid, unmoveable pillar of strength and solidarity. He squeezes then releases. I catch on that I am under scrutiny and manage to prevent the next sob.

'You were close.' His voice is a deep wheeze. A statement, not a question. I nod and he doesn't press for elaborations. We stand side by side while the others drift off. I am thirsty and cold with feverish thoughts.

Touching his shoulder lightly, I walk off. My lens case bumps my back and I realise that I have failed. Failed to blend in, failed to infiltrate. Failed to get a single shot of family, friend or foe. Failed to keep my eye on the prize, on the future, on a new start.

'Young man. Wait.' the deep voice follows me and I stop, close my eyes, feel the tears still flowing over. I have failed and now I have been caught out. 'Where are you going?'

I turn, eyes still shut. Your hand gropes round my face, leaving cold streaks. I open my eyes quickly to catch you out, but you're always one step out of sight. The heavy hand takes mine. Square finger nails. A deep, ingrained tan. He tells me the address for the wake. Tells me to take my time, finish my goodbyes. He wheezes to himself as he walks off. 'A remarkable woman.'

I have never felt like such a fraud. I walk back to the half-full grave and bow my head, in case he too is a man who looks back. No more memories come and no more tears. It's just a box in a pit of earth.

On the main street the heat bakes back at me from the surface of the pavement and cuts through my chills. I duck into a side alley and lean for a moment, catching my breath. The alley smells like hot bread, making me nauseous. I'd kill for a glass of water right now, massacre for ice. I know I can't actually go in to the wake. There's only so much grief one person can absorb before they disappear into the nothingness that swells up in the soul.

I will lie in wait and snap them going in and coming out. Wait for their threshold faces, blinking into the sunlight. A professional predator to the core. You inherited that from me, so you did. That ability to hide behind the stalking-horse of grief.

Despite the high sun, the shot I'm setting up to pass the time is almost a classic. The urban charm of the small, cobbled street is offset by the prevalence of chain-retail outlets. The first three tries, a woman with a pram partially obscures a book stall. I wipe the sweat collecting in my eyebrows and refocus.

The next thing I know, the camera is knocked away from my face. I scramble for it – miss – catch the strap and the lens swings barely an inch off the cobbles.

‘Thief!’ A fist waves at me and I tip backwards, land awkwardly and swear. ‘Blasphemer!’ The figure advances, blotted by the sun into an unfriendly, featureless shape.

I roll away, camera cradled, and heave myself up. The shape dwindles into a skinny little old man, more bone than brawn. I step towards him and he scuttles backwards, still shrieking at me. I keep advancing and he scuttles behind the bookstall. I gather that he is taking offence at my having taken his photograph without asking his permission. Or paying for it.

‘Buy a book.’ He pushes his face at me over the stall, eyes wide and bloodshot.

‘Not a chance.’ I smile as I shake my head. The venue for the wake is two doors further up the street. I keep one eye on it, scanning for the first person to step into shot.

‘You hit me,’ he says.

I blink. ‘You hit me.’

He smiles back and steps out from behind the table. I frown, bracing myself. He steps forward. His hand creeps up and down my sleeve, smoothing the wrinkles from the fabric and patting at my pockets. I take a step back and shake him off.

‘I won’t press charges,’ he says. ‘Buy a book sir. For charity.’

‘I’ve got somewhere to be,’ I raise my palms in what I hope comes across as conciliation. Every time I step back he follows me, up in my face. His eyes are on the camera still. ‘I’ll catch you on my way back. When are you here until?’

‘Buy a book. Help the poor and needy.’ His smile is fixed. ‘Or give me my soul back.’ His fingers are crab claws, catching at the plastic webbing of the strap over my shoulder.

‘Fine. I’ll buy one.’ I swing the camera out of his reach. The stall is simply a low, wooden fold-out table with some rather tatty books piled on top. ‘Do you have a licence?’

He laughs like we’re old friends. He asks my name.

I don’t answer him.

‘I am Lawrence.’ He picks up a red and gold book from the top of a pile and passing it to me. ‘This one is five pounds.’

I raise my eyebrows but he pays me no attention. He strokes the books on the table and neatens the edges of the piles.

‘Like the church?’ I ask.

‘Exactly so, my friend. For charity, these books. For the deserving poor.’

‘Got anything cheaper?’

‘Very good quality, these books. Old craftsmanship. Never find any better.’

‘Wouldn’t look for it either. I’m not a reader.’

‘We are nostalgic for the things we never had, sir.’

Nutter. I put the book down on the table and turn to leave.

Lawrence places his hands together as if about to pray. ‘Like one that on a lonesome road, doth walk in fear and dread. And having once turned round walks on, and turns no more his head.’

‘Excuse me?’



‘Because he knows a frightful fiend doth close behind him tread.’

‘Stop it.’

‘Mr Coleridge. Very good man.’ I put the book down on the table and walk away.

When I come back, barely two minutes later, he has half the books packed away.

‘Give it back.’

‘You forgot something, sir?’ He holds out the red book again. My wallet is on the table behind him. I snatch it and my cards are all there, but there’s a twenty pound note missing. ‘So kind, to give so generously. Your book.’

It’s a bible. I look closer and like a lens clicking into focus I can see that all the books on the table are bibles. ‘Where did you get these?’ I ask, suspecting thievery.

‘Generous donations, kind people like yourself wanting to help out those in need.’ Something he said before is tugging at my memory. Mr Coleridge. Lines learnt in school. He holds the red bible, stroking the cover, reluctant to let go.

‘What were you quoting before?’

‘Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched with a woeful agony, which forced me to begin my tale; and then it left me free.’ He looks like he’s about to cry. On impulse I tell him he can keep the book. ‘Since then, at an uncertain hour, that agony returns; and till my ghastly tale is told, this heart within me burns.’

‘Keep the change.’

‘Very kind, sir.’ I don’t walk away. There must be twenty, twenty-five bibles on the table.

‘Did you steal these?’

‘Distributing church property to the poor is not theft, sir.’ I hunt in my pocket and find a tissue. He blows his nose messily and I look away. When I turn back, he has pulled a ragged, dusty red suitcase out from under the table and he’s packing the rest of the bibles away. Like the books, the suitcase has clearly seen better days.

I help him fold the table and he heaves it awkwardly under one arm, balancing it against his thigh. ‘Can I help you with that?’

‘Very kind young man. You cannot help me.’

‘Do you need money? Where are you going?’ He waddles off. I follow, half-jogging to keep up. My camera case bashes against my hip and I stop to check the lens cover is on and when I look up he has disappeared round the corner.

I catch up with him at the old railway depot. His shoes echo across the forecourt. Apart from two or three tramps sleeping – shirtless – on the benches, the place is deserted in the heat. Everyone who can afford to be is indoors today, faces pushed into the fridge, electric fans wafting a paper trail across the room behind them. The late morning crush of the bus feels like it was a hallucination.

‘Wait!’ He speeds up when I shout. I high-speed limp after him. The air above the overgrown steel runners wavers around us, bringing to mind the arid desert of old Westerns. The old man – Lawrence – slips into the shadow of a carriage and I follow him, ducking my head and worrying about the thick needle of tetanus shots.

The oven of the carriage is lined with books. Stacked, sprawled, slipping piles of books. 'What is this place?' I ask, trying not to knock the landslides as we move further in.

'The library at the end of the world,' he says, dropping the tatty red suitcase on a half-upholstered seat. 'My home. The place I come to forget myself.'

'I have no home,' I say. Then I realise that it's true. The house is mine on paper, but the man who lives there isn't someone I recognise anymore. It's yours; keep it. Stay there forever. Just stop. Please stop. Let me stop looking back and get back out into the cold air. Lawrence ignores me and peers at the books. Eventually he pulls one out – flicks through it – and stubs a finger to point out a line.

'Here,' he says. 'This explains everything.'

In shuffling forward to look I knock into a pile of books. Like dominoes, the stacks in the carriageway begin tip one by one. Like dominoes, the trails of destruction flow one way then another. Like dominoes, they don't stop tipping until they're all fallen down, every last sharp-cornered pile.

I am close enough to the doorway to make it out in time. Lawrence is slower than me. When the echoes have died down and the carriage is no longer rocking as if in a ghost of a journey I call his name..

Inside the avalanche of the railway carriage library there is no reply, just an unfortunate stillness of dust settling. I scan for arms and legs: nothing. I repeat his name: nothing.

A week later – when most of the books are re-stacked – there is still no trace of Lawrence.

\*

Nate is the one who finds me; his knees crack as he squats down on the tarmac and he rocks a little to keep his balance while I finish the chapter. ‘It’s been a while, little brother,’ he says. ‘Mam was worried.’

‘She’s still alive?’

‘Doing better than you. When did you last eat?’ I stare at the black letters on the yellow page in front of me. My brother sighs and stretches his legs out in front of him, shifting to one side to avoid the leak. ‘What is this place?’

I tell Nate about Kitty Patterson’s funeral and the old man. He clears his throat and shifts. I tell him to pull over one of the encyclopaedias as a cushion. He counts on his fingers.

‘You’ve been here six weeks?’

I shrug and turn the page.

‘For fuck’s sake Daniel—’ He stands up and walks to the other end of the railway carriage. I shut my eyes and wait for him to knock over one of the stacks and for the books to take me away. When I open them, Nate has disappeared.

It's still light enough to read when he comes back. My older brother looks away when I put the sandwich down, carefully, on top of a pile of Penguin Classics.

'The car's parked round the corner.'

I shake my head.

'I'll be back tomorrow then.' Nate takes something out of his pocket and leaves it next to the sandwich. I wait for his footsteps to echo away, then pick it up. In the photograph we're both so young that our hair is fair; mine is almost shoulder-length, making me look like a girl. I'm clutching a spade at an awkward angle and Nate is trying to climb over the back of the bench. With his face turned away from the camera, the age-gap between us isn't so obvious.

The battered red suitcase is packed and resting against my shins while I eat the stale sandwich. In the distance I count the passing hours of the town clock chiming. Midday comes and goes. I open a bilingual version of Neruda's love poetry and sound the Spanish words out loud. Three-quarters of the way through the volume, Nate arrives and stands in the doorway with his arms folded.

'She took a turn for the worse. You coming?'

'Thank you for the sandwich.' I put the book down and try to pick the suitcase up. This is how I discover that my arms are wasted into weakness. I look down and see that my clothes are rubbed in dust: I'm turning into a memory. 'Nate, I—'

‘Save it for the car: I don’t know how much time we have.’ Nate ducks into the carriage with me and takes the case. Maybe swinging the case up does it or perhaps it’s his arm knocks something: I hear the book-piles rumble and see them start to slide.

A thick, sharp-edged hardback cuts a red line on Nate’s forehead. I scream and shake and wait to be swallowed up.

‘Jesus Daniel – they’re just books.’ My brother rests his hand on my shoulder, peering into my face. ‘Stop it.’

I blink. There are several books lying slipshod on the carriage floor – dust rising up and settling on our trousers – and Nate is silhouetted in the doorway, waiting for me.

Outside in the sunshine, my eyes hurt. Nate has to do my seatbelt up for me. His palm knocks my hipbone and I wince. His fingers trace the bones of my ribs.

‘Do you think this is what Maggie wanted for you?’ His eyes are bright as he drives. ‘What kind of uncle are you being to my boys? What kind of son are you for Mam? We’ve all been so—’

I mumble sorry, stroking the red leather of the suitcase on my lap. We drive the rest of the way to the hospital in silence.

From a plastic chair in the corner, I sip a glass of water and watch Nate smooth the hair back from Mam’s forehead and confer with the nurses.

‘She can still hear you. Read her the paper.’ Now he’s smoothing my hair. ‘I’ll be back in five minutes.’

One of the nurses helps me move the chair closer to Mam's bed. I can follow the path of the tubes into and under her skin. There's no sound inside the curtains but the rasp of the oxygen machine. I take her hand. 'Mary Queen of Scots had the most translucent skin,' I tell her. Is that a flutter of an eyelid? 'So white, so pale that when she drank red wine the courtiers swore blind they could see the path of the rubies down her throat.' Nothing. 'Not a patch on you right now though, mam.'

There's a newspaper on top of the bedside locker dated *Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> August 2013* which may or may not be from today. The headlines are all about Kitty Patterson's murder and the preparations for the trial. 'Bet you'd give that woman an earful,' I say to her closed eyes. 'Killing off your favourite author before she'd finished that last trilogy.' There's a picture of the stacks of flowers left outside the TV studios in America where she was shot. I fold the paper back up. 'Less of that, now.'

In the locker are two Kitty Patterson novels: *Mother's Ruin* and *The Curse in a Dead Man's Eye*. They're both library books. 'You been sending the nurses to spy on that boy in the library again Mam?' I ask her. 'You'll get done for sexual harassment. These are due back tomorrow.' There's a bookmark in *Mother's Ruin* so I open it.

The main character is called Maggie. Are you there?

I shut the book. 'Maybe we can just talk for a bit.' I wonder how long Nate will be. I'm ready to have a rest now. Being very careful not to jar myself against the rail or dislodge any of her machinery, I ease myself onto the bed next to Mam. 'I'll tell you a story.' I remember the photograph of the two blonde children, ruddy from a day at the

seaside, waiting in the station to go home. Tucking one of my feet under the sheets, I start.

*The sound of trains still reminds me of my childhood.*



## Appendix A

Structural breakdown of selected primary texts listed alphabetically by author, then chronological by date of first publication within each author's *oeuvre*. Paratext may vary between editions.

- **Atkinson, Kate:** *Human Croquet, Behind the Scenes at the Museum, Emotionally Weird, Not The End Of The World, Case Histories, One Good Turn, When Will There Be Good News*
- **Barnes, Julian:** *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters, Arthur & George*
- **Calvino, Italo:** *Our Ancestors, If on a winter's night a traveller*
- **Cela, Camilo José:** *The Hive*
- **Crumey, Andrew:** *Music, in a Foreign Language, Pfitz, D'Alembert's Principle, Mr Mee, Mobius Dick, Sputnik Caledonia*
- **Duncker, Patricia:** *Hallucinating Foucault, Monsieur Shoushana's Lemon Trees, James Miranda Barry, Seven Tales Of Sex And Death, Miss Webster and Chérif*
- **Gale, Patrick:** *Rough Music, Notes from an Exhibition*
- **Garland, Alex:** *The Beach, The Tesseract*
- **Hall, Sarah:** *How To Paint A Dead Man*
- **Ishiguro, Kazuo:** *Nocturnes*
- **McCarthy, Cormac:** *The Road*
- **Miano, Sarah Emily:** *Encyclopaedia of Snow, Van Rijn*
- **Milward, Richard:** *Ten Storey Love Song*
- **Mitchell, David:** *Ghostwritten, number9dream, Cloud Atlas, Black Swan Green, The Thousand Autumns of Jacob De Zoet*
- **Nicholls, David:** *Starter For Ten, The Understudy, One Day*
- **Self, Will:** *The Quantity Theory of Insanity, Cock & Bull, My Idea Of Fun, Grey Area and other stories, The Sweet Smell of Psychosis, Great Apes, Tough, Tough Toys for Tough, Tough Boys, How The Dead Live, Dorian, Dr Mukti and other tales of woe, The Book of Dave, The Butt, Liver*
- **Smith, Ali:** *Free Love and other stories, Like, Other Stories and other stories, Hotel World, The Whole Story and other stories, The Accidental, Girl Meets Boy*
- **Thomas, Scarlett:** *PopCo, The End of Mr. Y, Our Tragic Universe*
- **Torday, Paul:** *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen, The Irresistible Inheritance of Wilberforce, The Girl on the Landing*

**Atkinson, Kate: *Human Croquet***

No subtitle. No header. Prefaced by a quote. Divided into fourteen titled sections, one of which has no text following and the other thirteen of which are subdivided into titled chapters. Some chapterlets divided by leaf graphics. NB- Final section, 'Future', also contains an end quote and graphic.

- Beginning

Subdivided into one titled chapter:

Streets of Trees

- Present

Subdivided into two titled chapters:

Something Weird

What's Wrong

- Past

Subdivided into one titled chapter:

Half-Day Closing

- Present

Subdivided into one titled chapter:

Leaves of Light

- Past

Subdivided into one titled chapter:

Backward People

- Present

Subdivided into one titled chapter:

Experiments With Aliens

- Past

Subdivided into one titled chapter:

The Fruit of This Countrie

- Present

Subdivided into three titled chapters:

Experiments With Aliens (Contd.)

Theartofsuccessfulentertaining

Killing Time

- Present [no text follows]
- Maybe

Subdivided into one titled chapter:

There Is Another World But It Is This One

- Past

Subdivided into one titled chapter:

The Bonny Bonny Road

- Present

Subdivided into one titled chapter:

This Green And Laughing World

- Past

Subdivided into one titled chapter:

The Original Sin

- Future

Subdivided into two titled chapters separated by an end quote page and followed by a graphic:

Streets Of Trees

[end quote]

A Good Game For A Party

[untitled end graphic]

**Atkinson, Kate: *Behind the Scenes at the Museum***

No subtitle. No header. Divided into twenty-five numbered, titled chapters, thirteen of which are also dated.

Chapter One: 1951, Conception

Footnote (i) – Country Idyll

Chapter Two: 1952, Birth

Footnote (ii) – Still Lives

Chapter Three: 1953, Coronation

Footnote (iii) – Business as Usual

Chapter Four: 1956, The Naming of Things

Footnote (iv) – Bonny Birds

Chapter Five: 1948, Interlude

Footnote (v) – Rain

Chapter Six: 1959, Snow Feathers

Footnote (vi) – The Sunday School Outing

Chapter Seven: 1960, Fire! Fire!

Footnote (vii) – Zeppelin!

Chapter Eight: 1963, The Rings of Saturn

Footnote (viii) – New Boots

Chapter Nine: 1964, Holiday!

Footnote (ix) – In the Realm of Aire and Angells

Chapter Ten: 1966, Wedding Bells

Footnote (x) – Lillian

Chapter Eleven: 1968, Wisdom

Footnote (xi) – The Wrong Life

Chapter Twelve: 1970, Broken English

Footnote (xii) – 1914, Home

Chapter Thirteen: 1992, Redemption

**Atkinson, Kate: *Emotionally Weird: A Comic Novel***

Subtitle does not appear on cover but is on inner title page. No header. Prefaced by a quote. Divided into two dated sections and twenty-seven titled sections. The two dated sections have no text following the section page. Three of the titled sections are subdivided into chapters. NB- font changes both between and also within sections. Some chapterlets divided by shell graphic.

- The Hand of Fate (First Draft)

Subdivided into one numbered chapter:

1

- 1972 [no text follows]
- Blood and Bone
- Chez Bob
- The Art of Structuralist Criticism
- What Nora Missed
- There Are Places Between Edinburgh and Dundee [contains black graphic]
- Chez Bob
- Something Fishy
- Chez Bob
- Reductio ad Absurdum
- Chez Bob
- Cloudminding
- Chez Bob
- The House of Fiction
- Detour
- Chez Bob
- The World Is Hollow
- Or Else
- Chez Bob
- What Maisie Didn't Know
- Is Achieving a Transcendentally Coherent View of the World Still a Good Thing?
- Chez Bob
- Great Excitement
- Blood and Bone
- 1999 [no text follows]
- The Meaning of Life
- The Hand of Fate by Effie Andrews

Subdivided into an untitled chapter, followed by one numbered, titled chapter. NB-page numbers appear in a different position to previous text:

[untitled]

Chapter One: Lady Luck

- Last Words

Subdivided into one untitled chapter, followed by an end quote page:

[untitled]

[end quote]

### **Atkinson, Kate: *Not The End Of The World***

No subtitle. Headed by book title on left and section title on right. Table of contents listing twelve numbered, titled sections with corresponding page numbers. Divided into twelve numbered, titled sections, each with individual graphic. Each numbered, titled

section starts with a quote page. Each numbered, titled section divided into chapterlets divided by maze graphic.

- I: Charlene and Trudi Go Shopping [quote page also includes the dedication ‘For Sally’]
- II: Tunnel of Fish
- III: Transparent Fiction
- IV: Dissonance [quote page also includes the dedication ‘For Maureen Allan’]
- V: Sheer Big Waste Of Love
- VI: Unseen Translation
- VII: Evil Doppelgängers [quote page also includes the dedication ‘For Gareth MacleanAllan’]
- VIII: The Cat Lover [quote page also includes the dedication ‘For Ali and Sarah’]
- IX: The Bodies Vest
- X: Temporal Anomaly
- XI: Wedding Favours
- XII: Pleasureland [quote page also includes the dedication ‘For Donald Barthelme, 1931-89. Gone but living on in the words.’]

**Atkinson, Kate: *Case Histories***

No subtitle. Headed by book title on left and chapter title on right. Prefaced by a quote. Divided into twenty-eight numbered, titled chapters, two of which are also dated and seven of which are dated and numbered as ‘Case Histories’.

- 1: Case History No. 1 1970, Family Plot
- 2: Case History No. 2 1994, Just a Normal Day
- 3: Case History No. 3 1979, Everything from Duty, Nothing from Love
- 4: Jackson, 2004
- 5: Amelia
- 6: Theo, 2004
- 7: Caroline
- 8: Jackson
- 9: Amelia
- 10: Theo
- 11: Jackson
- 12: Caroline
- 13: Amelia
- 14: Jackson
- 15: Theo
- 16: Caroline
- 17: Jackson
- 18: Amelia
- 19: Jackson
- 20: Case History No.4 1971, Holy Girls
- 21: Jackson
- 22: Caroline

23: Case History No.3 1979, Everything from Duty, Nothing from Love

24: Theo

25: Case History No.2 1994, Just a Normal Day

26: Amelia

27: Case History No. 1 1970, Family Plot

28: And Julia Said

**Atkinson, Kate: *One Good Turn: A Jolly Murder Mystery***

Subtitle does not appear on cover but is on inner title page. Prefaced by a quote. Divided into four titled sections. Each titled sections divided into numbered chapters.

- Tuesday

Subdivided into numbered chapters:

‘1’ to ‘15’

- Wednesday

Subdivided into numbered chapters:

‘16’ to ‘35’

- Thursday

Subdivided into numbered chapters:

‘36’ to ‘51’

- Friday

Subdivided into numbered chapters:

‘52’ to ‘59’

**Atkinson, Kate: *When Will There Be Good News***

No subtitle. No header. Prefaced by a quote. Divided into five numbered, titled sections, each subdivided into titled chapters.

- I: In the Past

Subdivided into one titled chapter:

Harvest

- II: Today

Subdivided into twelve titled chapters:

Flesh and Blood

The Life and Adventures of Reggie Chase, Containing a Faithful Account of the Fortunes, Misfortunes, Uprisings, Downfallings and Complete Career of the Chase Family

Ad Augusta per Angusta

She Would Get the Flowers Herself

Sanctuary

To Brig O’Dread Thou Com’st At Last

Satis House

Rapture Ready

The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie

Funny Old World

The Celestial City

- III: Tomorrow

Subdivided into twelve titled chapters:

The Dogs They Left Behind

Adam Lay Ybounden

Outlaw

The Famous Reggie

Missing in Action

Reggie Chase, Girl Detective

Pilgrim's Progress

'An Elderly Aunt'

Nada y Pues Nada

Ad Lucem

Fiat Lux

Grave Danger

- IV: And Tomorrow

Subdivided into six titled chapters:

Jackson Risen

Dr Foster Went to Gloucester

A Good Man Is Hard to Find

Abide with Me

Reggie Chase, Warrior Virgin

Jackson Leaves the Building

- V: And Tomorrow

Subdivided into fourteen titled chapters:

The Prodigal Wife

Arma Virumque Cano

Road Trip

Tribulation

High Noon

La Règle du Jeu

A Clean Well-lighted Place

Sweet Little Wife, Pretty Little Baby

Great Expectations

A Puppy Is Just for Christmas

The Rising of the Sun, the Running of the Deer

God Bless Us, Every One

Safely Gathered In

And Scout

**Barnes, Julian: *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters***

No subtitle. No header. Table of contents listing eleven titled sections, ten of which are also numbered, with corresponding page numbers. Divided into eleven numbered, titled sections, two of which are subdivided into chapters and two of which are subdivided into chapterlets.

- One: The Stowaway
- Two: The Visitors
- Three: The Wars of Religion

Subdivided into one untitled chapterlet followed by seven titled chapterlets: '[untitled]', 'Pétition des habitants', 'Plaidoyer des habitants', 'Plaidoyer des insectes', 'Réplique des habitants', 'Réplique des insectes', 'Conclusions du procureur épiscopal', 'Sentence du juge d'Église'

- Four: The Survivor
- Five: Shipwreck

Subdivided into two numbered chapters:

I [contains fold-out coloured insert reproducing a painting]

II

Subdivided into one untitled and one titled chapterlet: '[untitled]' and 'Notes'

- Six: The Mountain
- Seven: Three Simple Stories

Subdivided into three numbered chapters:

I

II

III

- Eight: Upsteam!

Subdivided into twenty-one titled chapterlets, fifteen of which are also numbered.

NB- chapterlets titles are on the right: 'Postcard', 'Letter 1' to 'Letter 13', 'Telegram', 'Telegram', 'Telegram', 'Telegram', 'Letter 14', 'Letter 15', 'Telegram'

- Parenthesis
- Nine: Project Ararat
- Ten: The Dream

### **Barnes, Julian: *Arthur & George***

No subtitle. No header. Divided into four numbered, titled sections, each subdivided into titled chapterlets. Author's note at end.

- One: Beginnings

Subdivided into twenty-four titled chapterlets: 'Arthur', 'George', 'Arthur', 'George', 'Arthur', 'George', 'Arthur', 'George', 'Arthur', 'George', 'Arthur', 'George', 'Arthur', 'George', 'Arthur', 'George', 'Arthur', 'George', 'Arthur', 'George', 'Arthur', 'George', 'Arthur', 'George'

- Two: Beginning with an Ending

Subdivided into sixteen titled chapterlets, one of which contains a graphic: 'George', 'Arthur', 'George', 'Arthur', 'George' [contains graphic], 'Arthur', 'George & Arthur', 'George', 'Campbell', 'George', 'Campbell', 'George', 'Campbell', 'George', 'George', 'Arthur'

- Three: Ending with a Beginning

Subdivided into seven titled chapterlets: 'Arthur & George', 'Arthur', 'Anson', 'Arthur', 'George & Arthur', 'Arthur & George', 'George & Arthur'

- Four: Endings



Subdivided into one titled chapterlet: 'George'

Author's note

**Calvino, Italo: *Our Ancestors*** (trans. by Archibald Colquhoun)

No subtitle. Headed by book title on left and section title on right. Table of contents listing Introduction and three titled sections. Introduction, followed by another title

Introduction by the author

- Our Ancestors [no text follows]
- The Cloven Viscount

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets: '1' to '10'

- Baron in the Trees

Prefaced by a dedication, 'to Paloma'. Subdivided into numbered chapterlets: '1' to '30'

- The Non-Existent Knight

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets: '1' to '12'

**Calvino, Italo: *If on a winter's night a traveller*** (trans. by William Weaver)

No subtitle. Headed by section title on both left and right. Table of contents listing twenty-two chapters, twelve of which are numbered and the other ten of which are titled, with corresponding page numbers. Divided into twenty two chapters, twelve of which are numbered and the other ten of which are titled.. NB- numbered chapters appear in header in form e.g. 'chapter one'.

1

If on a winter's night a traveller

2

Outside the town of Malbork

3

Leaning from the steep slope

4

Without fear of wind or vertigo

5

Looks down in the gathering shadow

6

In a network of lines that enlase

7

In a network of lines that intersect

8 [subtitled: 'From the diary of Silas Flannery']

On the carpet of eaves illuminated by the moon

9

Around an empty grave

10

What story down there awaits its end

11

12

**Cela, Camilo José: *The Hive*** (trans. by J. M. Cohen and Arturo Barea)

No subtitle. No header. Divided into seven chapters, the first six of which are numbered and the final of which is titled.

Chapter One to Chapter Six

Finale

**Crumey, Andrew: *Music, in a Foreign Language***

No subtitle. No header. Divided into four numbered sections subdivided into numbered chapters, preceded by five numbered chapters.

0 to 4

- Part Two

Subdivided into eight numbered chapters:

5 to 12

- Part Three

Subdivided into five numbered chapters:

13 to 17

- Part Four

Subdivided into eight numbered chapters:

18 to 25

- Part Five

Subdivided into five numbered chapters:

26 to 30

**Crumey, Andrew: *Pfitz: A Novel***

Subtitle appears on cover but not on inside title pages. No header. Divided into twenty-one numbered chapters.

Chapter One to Chapter Twenty-One

**Crumey, Andrew: *D'Alembert's Principle: Memory, Reason and Imagination***

Subtitle does not appear on front cover but does appear on inside title pages. No header. Prefaced by an Introduction by John Clute. Divided into three titled sections, the first and third of which are subdivided into numbered chapterlets. The middle titled section is subdivided into two chapters, the second of which is subdivided into one untitled and five titled chapterlets.

Introduction by John Clute

- D'Alembert's Principle

Subdivided into nine numbered chapterlets: 'I' to 'IX'

- The *Cosmography* Of Magnus Ferguson

Subdivided into two chapters:

Introduction

The Cosmography

Subdivided into one untitled and five titled chapterlets: '[untitled]', 'Mercury', 'Venus', 'Mars', 'Jupiter', 'Saturn'

- Tales From Rreinnstadt

Subdivided into four numbered chapterlets: 'I' to 'IV'

**Crumey, Andrew: *Mr Mee***

No subtitle. Headed by author name on left and book title on right. Divided into fourteen chapters, thirteen of which are numbered and one of which is titled.

Chapter 1 to Chapter 13

Epilogue

**Crumey, Andrew: *Mobius Dick***

No subtitle. Headed by author name on left and book title on right. Divided into fourteen titled chapters.

Call Me: H.

From *The Angel Returns* by Heinrich Behring [footnote: 'English translation by Celia Carter. Cromwell Press, British Democratic Republic, 1949']

Predestined

Harry's Tale

From *Professor Faust* by Heinrich Behring [footnote: 'English translation by Celia Carter. Cromwell Press, British Democratic Republic, 1954']

Ghosts

Harry's Tale

A Natural Explanation

Harry's Tale

Enlightenment

From *Professor Faust* by Heinrich Behring [footnote: 'English translation by Celia Carter. Cromwell Press, British Democratic Republic, 1954']

Arrival

Harry's Tale

Author's Postscript by Heinrich Behring

**Crumey, Andrew: *Sputnik Caledonia***

No subtitle. Headed by author title on left and book title on right. Divided into three numbered sections, each divided into numbered chapterlets.

- Part One

Subdivided into fourteen numbered chapterlets, '1' to '14'

- Part Two

Subdivided into twenty-three numbered chapterlets, '1' to '23'

- Part Three

Subdivided into thirteen numbered chapterlets, '1' to '13'

**Duncker, Patricia: *Hallucinating Foucault***

Headed by author name on left and book title on right. Prefaced by Acknowledgements.

Divided into four titled sections:

- Cambridge

- Paris
- Clermont
- The Midi

**Duncker, Patricia: *Monsieur Shoushana's Lemon Trees***

Headed by author's name on left and chapter title on right. Table of contents listing Acknowledgements and thirteen titled chapters with corresponding page numbers. Prefaced by a poem. NB- 'The Arrival Matters' contains a chapterlet subtitle at the start.

Acknowledgements

Monsieur Shoushana's Lemon Trees

The Stations of the Cross

Betrayal

Death Before Dishonour

The River and the Red Spring Moon

James Miranda Barry: 1795-1865

The Woman Alone

The Crew from M6

The Storm

The Glass Porch

Gramsci and the Sparrow

Aria Nova

The Arrival Matters [chapterlet subtitled *For Miranda*]

**Duncker, Patricia: *James Miranda Barry***

Headed by book title on left and section title on right. Table of contents listing six numbered and titled sections and an Afterword, each with corresponding page numbers. Prefaced by two quotes. Divided into six numbered and titled sections, each with individual graphics. NB- 'Part Six: Alice Jones' contains an end chapter, 'Afterwork'.

- Part One: The House in the Country
- Part Two: North & South
- Part Three: The Painter's Death
- Part Four: The Colony
- Part Five: Tropics
- Part Six: Alice Jones

Contains an end chapter: Afterword

**Duncker, Patricia: *The Deadly Space Between***

No header. Prefaced by three quotes. Divided into nine numbered, titled chapters.

1: Memory

2: Laboratory

3: Bonfire

4: Jealousy

5: Justice

6: Flight

7: Bodensee

8: Fire

9: Ice

**Duncker, Patricia: *Seven Tales Of Sex And Death***

Headed by author name on left and section title on right. Preceded by Author's Note. Table of contents listing seven numbered, titled sections with corresponding page numbers. Divided into seven numbered, titled sections

- 1: Stalker
- 2: Sophia Walters Shaw
- 3: Small Arms
- 4: Moving
- 5: The Strike
- 6: Paris
- 7: My Emphasis [subtitled *For Mathilde* on section title page]

**Duncker, Patricia: *Miss Webster and Chérif***

No header. Prefaced by three quotes. Divided into six numbered, titled chapters:

1: The Messenger

2: Taxi Driver

3: The Visitor

4: Unsuitable Music

5: Attentat

6: Desert

**Gale, Patrick: *Rough Music***

No subtitle. Headed by book title on left and chapter title on right. Prefaced by three quotes. Divided into forty chapters, the first and last of which are untitled, the other thirty-eight are titled. Chapter titles repeat in an **ABCBCBCBCBCBCBCBCBCBCBCBCBCBCBCBBA** pattern (deviations in bold).

[untitled] [A]

Blue House [B]

Beachcomber [C]

Blue House

Beachcomber

Blue House

Beachcomber

Blue House

Beachcomber

Blue House

Beachcomber

Bluehouse

Beachcomber



Norman Morrison (1965)  
 Snow Scene (1955)  
 Betty Jackson Dress (1985)  
 Jubilee Pool (1965)  
 Unnamed Study (1967?)  
 Life Study: Josh MacArthur (1958)  
 Nightdress (c.2001)  
 Untitled (1986)

**Garland, Alex: *The Beach***

Headed by book title on left and section title on right. Table of contents listing twelve titled sections and corresponding page numbers. Divided into one titled chapter with graphic at end, preceding eleven titled sections, each with individual graphic. Sections divided into titled chapters.

Boom-Boom [contains graphic at end]

- Bangkok

Subdivided into seven titled chapters

Bitch

Geography

Étienne

Mute

Françoise

Local Colour

It's Life Jim, But Not As We Know It

- Ko Samui

Subdivided into seven titled chapters:

R&R

Suckered

Spaced Invaders

TV Heaven

Eden

A Safe Bet

Leaving

- Getting There

Subdivided into eleven titled chapters:

Littering

Thai-Die

All These Things

In Country

Falling Down

FNG

Batman

Talk

Exploring

Exocet

Game Over, Man

- Beach Life

Subdivided into nine titled chapters:

Assimilation, Rice

'Night John-Boy

Negative

Corals

Bugged

Zero

Revelations

Invisible Wires

'Toon Time

- The Rice Run

Subdivided into nine titled chapters:

Jed

Self-Help

The List

West More Land

Re-entry

Kampuchea

Blame

Through Early Morning Fog I See

Messed Up

- Prisoners of the Sun

Subdivided into ten titled chapters:

Bible-Bashing

Jaws One

Hi, Man

Cab!

Seeing Red

Naturism

The Good News

Ich bin ein Beacher

Dislocation

The Decisive Moment

- In Country

Subdivided into fifteen titled chapters:

Aspect One

White Lies

Ol' Blue

Credit

Phosphorescence

The DMZ



Zombie Fish-Eaters

Bedlam

Incubus

Good Morning

Epitaph

The VC, The DMZ And Me

Split

The Third Man

Shadowed

- Incoming

Subdivided into eleven titled chapters:

Politics

Dissent

Whoosh, Boom, Zzz

Ashes to Dust

My Lost Shit

To Those Who Wait

Fine Thanks

Cabin Fever

Secrets

Black Cloud

Shh

- FNG, KIA

Subdivided into nine titled chapters:

Fuckin' A

Their Big Mistake

I Know Abou' Tha'

Cheap Shots

Mama-San

Reanimator

Reasonable Doubt

Up-ended

Same-Same, But Different

- Beaucoup Bad Shit

Subdivided into fifteen titled chapters:

Spud-Bashing

Is It Safe?

Efforts

Show, Don't Tell

Spiked

Don't Mean Nothing

Potchentong

A Loose End

Something Happening Here

What It Is Ain't Exactly Clear

That Sound

Apocalypse

Now

Friendly Fire

But Nothing

- Game Over

Subdivided into one titled chapter:

Strange But True

**Garland, Alex: *The Tesseract***

Headed by book title on left and section title on right. Prefaced by a quote. Divided into four numbered sections, each with an individual graphic. The four sections are divided into titled chapters, some of which are divided into numbered chapterlets. NB- section '4—3' is divided into one chapter which is divided into titled chapterlets, and an Author's Note.

- 1—1

Subdivided into five titled chapters, four of which are subdivided into numbered chapterlets:

Black Dog

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets 1 to 5

The Conquistador

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets 1 to 5

The Squall

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets 1 to 5

Son-Less

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets 1 to 6

A Running Man

- 2—1

Subdivided into seven titled chapters, six of which are subdivided into numbered chapterlets:

Black Dog is Coming

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets 1 to 4

Flower Power

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets 1 to 5

Sandmen

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets 1 to 5

Locked and Lost

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets 1 to 5

Perro Mío

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets 1 to 3

Hollow be Thy Name

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets 1 to 9

The Conquistador Closes His Eyes

- 3—2

Subdivided into six titled chapters, all of which are subdivided into numbered chapterlets:

## Black Dog is Here

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets 1 to 4

## The Reason of Sleep

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets 1 to 4

## Rapid Eye Movement

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets 1 to 6

## Rescuing Girls

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets 1 to 5

QED

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets 1 to 4

## Supersymmetries

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets 1 to 3

- 4—3

Subdivided into one titled chapter and an Author's Note. The titled chapter is subdivided into thirteen titled chapterlets.

## The Tesseract

Subdivided into thirteen titled chapterlets: 'Sean' 'Lito' 'Raphael' 'Sonny', 'Teroy', 'Corazon', 'Don Pepe', 'Lita', 'Jojo', 'Totoy', 'Alfredo', 'Rosa', 'Vincente'

## Author's Note

**Hall, Sarah: *How To Paint A Dead Man***

No subtitle. No header. Prefaced by a quote. Divided into thirty-five titled chapters and a titled end section. Chapter titles repeat in an ABCDABCDABCDABCDABCDABCD**BCADCBA** pattern (deviation in bold).

Titled end section is in the form of a quote.

## The Mirror Crisis [A]

Translated from the Bottle Journals [B]

The Fool on the Hill [C]

The Divine Vision of Annette Tambroni [D]

## The Mirror Crisis

Translated from the Bottle Journals

## The Fool on the Hill

## The Divine Vision of Annette Tambroni

## The Mirror Crisis

Translated from the Bottle Journals

## The Fool on the Hill

## The Divine Vision of Annette Tambroni

## The Mirror Crisis

Translated from the Bottle Journals

## The Fool on the Hill

## The Divine Vision of Annette Tambroni

## The Mirror Crisis

Translated from the Bottle Journals  
 The Fool on the Hill  
 The Divine Vision of Annette Tambroni  
 The Mirror Crisis  
 Translated from the Bottle Journals  
 The Fool on the Hill  
 The Divine Vision of Annette Tambroni  
 The Mirror Crisis  
 Translated from the Bottle Journals  
 The Fool on the Hill  
 The Divine Vision of Annette Tambroni  
 Translated from the Bottle Journals  
 The Fool on the Hill  
 The Mirror Crisis  
 The Divine Vision of Annette Tambroni  
 The Fool on the Hill  
 Translated from the Bottle Journals  
 The Mirror Crisis

- How to Paint a Dead Man

**Ishiguro, Kazuo: *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall***

Subtitle appears on both cover and inside title page. Headed by book title on left and section title on right. Table of contents lists five titled sections with corresponding page numbers. Divided into five titled sections.

- Crooner
- Come Rain or Come Shine
- Malvern Hills
- Nocturne
- Cellists

**McCarthy, Cormac: *The Road***

No header. No section divides or chapters. Divided into chapterlets but with no titling or numbering.

**Miano, Sarah Emily: *Encyclopaedia of Snow***

Headed by chapterlet title on left and right, like a traditional encyclopaedia.

- Prologue
- Editor's Note.
- Alphabetical chapterlets, some of which are further subdivided, also many footnotes: 'Angel', 'Blindness', 'Crystals', 'Crystallisation (positive)', 'Crystallisation (negative)', 'Darkness', 'Deaths and Entrances', 'Dream...', 'Drifting', 'Elk', 'Eve', 'Fibs of Vision', 'Forgetful', 'Frigid', 'Gale', 'Gay', 'Hail', 'Harmony', 'Ice', 'Impatience', 'Journey', 'Kiss', 'Legend', 'Lost', 'Man', 'Materia Prima', 'Moon', 'Nana Nagashi Yo', 'Naked', 'Nativity', 'Orchestral',

- ‘Patron’, ‘Polar-ity’, ‘Preservation’, ‘Promise’, ‘Psyche & Colour’, ‘Quiet’, ‘Revelation’, ‘Schmutter’, ‘Shroud’, ‘Sledding’, ‘Snow’, ‘Snow’, ‘Snow’, ‘Lorenzo’, ‘Streamers’, ‘Kypáhne<sup>196</sup>’, ‘Testimony’, ‘Truth’, ‘Tulips’, ‘Ulu’, ‘Uukkarnit’, ‘Virginity’, ‘Whimsical’, ‘Wink & Whistle’, ‘Winter’, ‘X-mas’, ‘Yodeling’, ‘Zenith’.
- Notes, divided alphabetically: ‘Alchemy’, ‘Ammons, Archie Randolph’, ‘Andreyevich, Yury’, ‘Authors’, ‘Bailey, George’, ‘Baudelaire, Charles-Pierre’, ‘Beyle, Marie-Henri’, ‘Blake, William’, ‘Castorp, Hans’, ‘Compiler’, ‘Cummings, Sandy’, ‘Dahmer, Jeffrey L.’, ‘Editor’, ‘Eliot, Thomas Stearns’, ‘Encyclop(a)ed’ia’, ‘Ferguson, Francis’, ‘Ferguson, Libby’, ‘Flaubert, Gustave’, ‘Furey, Michael’, ‘A gentleman who lived on 128<sup>th</sup> Street’, ‘Gray, Lucy’, ‘Griselda of Hohenkrähen’, ‘Guerriri, Margie’, ‘Guerriri, Stella’, ‘Hooke, Robert’, ‘Hörnell, Anna Svartabjørn’, ‘Ibsen, Henrik’, ‘Kadinsky, Wassily’, ‘Krafft-Ebing, Richard von’, ‘The Lady-in-Waiting to the Empress Ulu’, ‘Lola-Lola’, ‘London, Jack’, ‘Massak’, ‘Meeko, Bella’, ‘Miano, Sarah Emily’, ‘Miller, Snowdrop’, ‘Monet, Claude’, ‘Moth and Butterfly’, ‘Nabokov, Vladimir’, ‘Nakaya, Ukichiro’, ‘Newbury, J. W.’, ‘Nussbaumer, Eva’, ‘Oates, Capt’, ‘Oddbody, Clarence’, ‘Paulina, an American in France’, ‘Pavlovski, Molly Jo.’, ‘Peck, Rev. Julian’, ‘Petrarch, Francesco’, ‘Plath, Sylvia’, ‘Protocol of the Deceased’, ‘Ramblin’ Lou Family Singers, The’, ‘Rimbaud, Jean’, ‘Rimsky-Korsakov, Nikolai’, ‘Sanna’, ‘Sansone, Stella’, ‘Scarecrow’, ‘Shay and Dora’, ‘Snow, Robert Esq.’, ‘Staël, Germaine, Madame de’, ‘Waterhouse, John William’, ‘Whipple, Fred Lawrence’, ‘Williams, Luke’, ‘YHWH’.
  - Epilogue: subdivided into object-titled chapterlets, preceeded by contents list: ‘An iron key’, ‘A cream-colored, polka-dotted handkerchief’, ‘An old photograph of a Swiss boy’, ‘A vial of perfume containing a scent that reminded him of his dead wife’, ‘A journal, tied-up with string’.
  - Closing quote.

### **Miano, Sarah Emily: *Van Rijn: A Novel***

Subtitle appears on cover only. Headed by book title on left and section title on right. Prefaced by quote page with four quotes. Contains contents page with list of titles and corresponding page numbers. Contains list of Dramatis Personae. Divided into thirty-seven titled chapters, some of which are also dated. NB- contents page does not include ‘Dramatis Personae’. NB- ‘Two Men in Tall Hats’, ‘The Ox’s Story’ and ‘Fragments of Clara’ are poems.

Dramatis Personae

Prologue

And God Said

‘Il Pittore Famoso’

*Leyden, 1628*: subdivided into nine titled chapterlets: ‘On The Moment of Conception’, ‘Apelles and Protogenes: Jealousy vs Admiration’, ‘An Introduction to the Painter’,

<sup>196</sup> Can’t translate font, appears to be perhaps in Ancient Greek, this is an approximation.

'Thoughts on Composition', 'My Workshop of Colours', 'How I Regulate My Life: A Son of Homer', 'Friendship Between Painters', 'Obstacles Incite Genius', 'My Mind Is like a Stage'.

'Krim-dja'

Neeltgen's Story

*Leyden, 1629*: subdivided into eleven titled chapterlets: 'Fashioning Oneself for the Cream of Society', 'The Boy on Crutches', 'How an Artist Establishes His Reputation', 'The Field of Blood', 'Light & Darkness', 'On Judging Your Painting', 'Beggars and Rogues', 'Beauty Is Not the Only Aim of Art', 'My First Set of Eyes', 'All Glory to Me, the Next Rubens', 'RHL'.

'Grooten atlas oft werelddbeschrijving'

Portrait of Father and Son

*Amsterdam, 1631*: subdivided into twelve titled chapterlets: 'My New Home', 'An Encounter in a Dingy Alleyway', 'A World of Colours, Smells, Sounds', 'My First Experience in the City', 'When a Painter Treats His Pigments as Living', 'The Drawing Lesson', 'Spiders and Flies', 'Diana and Her Nymph', 'Sweet Lady of My Desires', 'According to Pliny', 'My Etching Process', 'Nicholas Ruts, the Polecat'.

'Amoris Causa, Lucri Causa, Glorïae Causa'

*Kircher with His Magic Lantern*: subdivided into three numbered chapterlets: '1', '2', '3'.

*Amsterdam, 1632*: subdivided into eight titled chapterlets: 'My Shell Collection', 'The Van Uylenburgh Party, a Reunion', 'The Idle Hour', 'Fathers, Brothers and Sons', 'Only the Master Decides', 'Man's Inexorable End', 'Contrast & Harmony', 'A Visit to Willem Blaeu, Cartographer'.

Philosophers Sitting by Candlelight

'Nosce Te Ipsum'

*Amsterdam, 1635*: subdivided into eleven titled chapterlets: 'The Tobacco Wards Off Pestilence', 'A Shot of Hootch', 'Liefde Baart Kunst', 'Belshazzar's Feast, Part I', 'This Is Mokum', 'The Writing on the Wall', 'Belshazzar's Feast, Part II', 'The Utmost Forethought', 'My Workshop a Theatre, the Floorboards a Stage', 'Sleeping Saskia', 'How I Learned to Use My Eyes'.

'Bene vixit, bene qui latuit'

In the Valley

*Amsterdam, 1636*: subdivided into thirteen chapterlets: 'The Executioner', 'The Slumber of the Body, the Waking of the Soul', 'The Sacrifice of Isaac', 'Opening the Shutters', 'A Letter to Huygens', 'Two Sets of Hands', 'An Arrival in the Van Rijn Family', 'The New Theatre', 'Saskia's Milk', 'Creation of the Sacrifice', 'A New Formula', 'Liberty & Audacity', 'Oh, Dear Rombertus'.

The Woman with the Big Bosom's Story

'Boelering'

Two Men in Tall Hats

*Amsterdam, 1654*: subdivided into twelve chapterlets: 'Pinto's Piles', 'A Prayer of Thanks', 'David, Uriah and Bathsheba', 'How Am I to Pay My Debts?', 'Hendrickje Stoffels, My Bathsheba', 'Two Letters', 'Portrait of Jan Six, the Poet', 'Here I Am,

Titus, My Son', 'A Secret Ingredient, A Grand Scope', 'Hendrickje's Summons', 'Apelles and Homer', 'The Great Thunderclap'.

Fonteyn's Story

'Post tenebras spero lucem'

*Amsterdam, 1655*: subdivided into nine chapterlets: 'Snorting Like a Horse', 'Child to the Teat', 'The Glorified Pig Trough', 'A Woman Bathing', 'Only the Feet, Rembrandt!', 'Conversations at the Synagogue', 'Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph', 'Portrait of Abraham Francen, the Apothecary', 'The Inventory'.

A Black-cloaked Heretic

'Quis talia fando temperet a lacrimis?'

The Ox's Story

'Extremum umbrae solis tremere videtur'

*Amsterdam, 1668*: subdivided into ten chapterlets: 'A Final Bow?', 'The Foliage Is Dropping Fast', 'Magdalena's Visit', 'A Creeping Infection', 'Nothing but a Mist', 'The Old Blind Man Wasting Like a Candle', 'Deception and Defeat', 'The Company of Captain Frans Banning Cocq', 'A Radiant Light', 'Simeon and the Christ Child'.

Fragments of Clara

*Amsterdam, 1669*: subdivided into six chapterlets: 'The Laughing Philosopher', 'I Pass Entirely into My Canvas, Calmly', 'A Guardian Angel', 'I Never Painted Tulips', 'The Fever Rages, Shaking Me With Sweats', 'Deep Shadows Erase Me'.

'Stultorum infinituse st numerus'

The Ghost's Story

Upon the Surface of the Watery Deep

Epilogue

### **Milward, Richard: *Ten Storey Love Song***

No header. Prefaced by a quote. No section divisions, chapter division, chapterlets or anything similar. In fact, entire book is one (unbroken) paragraph. NB- ends on an open line (halfway through sentence, no closing punctuation).

### **Mitchell, David: *Ghostwritten: A Novel in Nine Parts***

Headed by author name on left, book title on right. Prefaced by a quote. Divided into ten subtitled sections. Contains contents page with list of the titles and corresponding page numbers.

- Okinawa
- Tokyo
- Hong Kong
- Holy Mountain
- Mongolia
- Petersburg
- London
- Clear Island
- Night Train
- Underground

**Mitchell, David: *number9dream***

Headed by book title on left, section title on right. Prefaced by a quote. Divided into nine numbered, subtitled sections, each with their own small graphic. NB- the graphics appear as embedded narrative section dividers throughout the book. NB- section Nine has no graphic or subtitle, and is followed by a blank page.

- One: Panopticon
- Two: Lost Property
- Three: Video Games
- Four: Reclaimed Land
- Five: Study of Tales
- Six: Kai Ten
- Seven: Cards
- Eight: The Language Of Mountains Is Rain
- Nine

**Mitchell, David: *Cloud Atlas***

Headed by book name on left, section name on right. Divided into x subtitled sections

- The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing

Subdivided into dated journal entries: 'Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> November', 'Friday 8<sup>th</sup> November', 'Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> November', 'Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> November', 'Monday 11<sup>th</sup> November', 'Night', 'Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> November', 'Later', 'Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> November', 'Evening', 'Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> November', 'Friday 15<sup>th</sup> November', 'Afternoon', 'Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> November', 'Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> November', 'Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> November', 'Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> December'.

- Letters from Zedelghem

Subdivided into one side of dated and addressed correspondence: '29<sup>th</sup>-vi-1931', '3<sup>rd</sup>-vii-1931', '14<sup>th</sup>-vii-1931', '28<sup>th</sup>-vii-1931', '16<sup>th</sup>-viii-1931', '16<sup>th</sup>-viii-1931', '29<sup>th</sup>-viii-1931', '14<sup>th</sup>-ix-1931', '28<sup>th</sup>-ix-1931'.

- Half Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets 1-39.

- The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish
- An Orison of Sonmi~451

Subdivided into question and answer format.

- Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After
- An Orison of Sonmi~451

Subdivided into question and answer format.

- The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish
- Half Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery

Subdivided into numbered chapterlets 40-70.

- Letters from Zedelghem

Subdivided into one side of dated and addressed correspondence: '10<sup>th</sup>-x-1931', '21<sup>st</sup>-x-1931', '24<sup>th</sup>-x-1931', '29<sup>th</sup>-x-1931', '6<sup>th</sup>-xi-1931', 'Near the endth-xi-1931', '25<sup>th</sup>-xi-1931', '12<sup>th</sup>-xii-1931'.

- The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing



Subdivided into dated journal entries: '(undated, second half of a letter)' 'Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> December', 'Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> December', 'Monday 9<sup>th</sup> December', 'Monday 16<sup>th</sup> December', 'Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> December', 'Friday 20<sup>th</sup> December', 'Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> December', 'Christmas Eve', 'Christmas Day', 'Later', 'Boxing Day', 'Friday 27<sup>th</sup> December', 'Later', 'Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> December', 'Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> December', 'Monday 30<sup>th</sup> December', 'Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> January', 'Monday 13<sup>th</sup> January'.

**Mitchell, David: *Black Swan Green***

Headed by author name on left, book title on right. Divided into thirteen subtitled chapters:

- January Man
- Hangman
- Relatives
- Bridlepath
- Rocks
- Spooks
- Solarium
- Souvenirs
- Maggot
- Knife Grinder
- Goose Fair
- Disco
- January Man

**Mitchell, David: *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob De Zoet***

No header. Prefaced by author's note. Divided into five numbered, subtitled, title-dated and year-dated sections. Sections subdivided into numbered, geographically subtitled and dated chapters. NB- Section II has no numerical year date, Sections III and V have an additional month prior to the year subtitle, Sections IV and V have no date subtitle.

- I: The Bride for Whom We Dance, *The Eleventh Year of the Era of Kansei*, 1799

Subdivided into:

I: *The House of Kawasemi the Concubine, above Nagasaki*, The Ninth Night of the Fifth Month.

II: *Captain Lacy's Cabin on the Shenandoah, Anchored in Nagasaki Harbour*, Evening of the 20<sup>th</sup> July, 1799.

III: *On a Sampan Moored alongside the Shenandoah, Nagasaki Harbour*, Morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> July, 1799.

IV: *Outside the Privy by Garden House on Dejima*, Before breakfast on the 29<sup>th</sup> July, 1799.

V: *Warehouse Doorn on Dejima*, After lunch on the 1<sup>st</sup> August, 1799.

VI: *Jacob's Room in Tall House on Dejima*, Very early on the morning of the 10<sup>th</sup> August, 1799.

VII: *Tall House on Dejima*, Early on Tuesday the 27<sup>th</sup> August, 1799.

VIII: *The State Room in the Chief's House on Dejima*, Ten o'clock in the morning on the 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 1799.

IX: *Clerk de Zoet's Quarters in Tall House*, Morning of Sunday the 15<sup>th</sup> September, 1799.

X: *The Garden on Dejima*, Late in the afternoon of the 16<sup>th</sup> September, 1799.

XI: *Warehouse Eik*, Before the typhoon of the 19<sup>th</sup> October, 1799.

XII: *The State Room in the Chief's House on Dejima*, Minutes after ten o'clock on the 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 1799.

XIII: *Flag Square on Dejima*, Morning mustering on the last day of October, 1799.

- II: A Mountain Fastness, *The Tenth Month in the Eleventh Year of the Era of Kansei*

Subdivided into:

XIV: *Above the Village of Kurozane in Kyôga Domain*, Late on the Twenty-second Day of the Tenth Month.

XV: *The House of Sisters, Mount Shiranui Shrine*, Sunrise on the Twenty-third Morning of the Tenth Month.

XVI: *The Shirandô Academy at the Ôtsuki Residence in Nagasaki*, Sunset on the Twenty-fourth Day of the Tenth Month.

XVII: *The Altar Room at the House of Sisters, Mount Shiranui Shrine*, The Twenty-Sixth Day of the Eleventh Month.

XVIII: *The Surgery on Dejima*, An hour before dinner on the Twenty-ninth Day of the Eleventh Month.

XIX: *The House of Sisters, Mount Shiranui Shrine*, Sunrise on the Ninth Day of the Twelfth Month.

XX: *The Two Hundred Steps leading to Ryûgaji Temple in Nagasaki*, New Year's Day, the Twelfth Year of the era of Kansei.

XXI: *Orito's Room at the House of Sisters*, The Eighth Night of the First Month in the Twelfth Year of the Era of Kansei.

XXII: *Shuzai's Room at his Dojo Hall in Nagasaki*, Afternoon of the Thirteenth Day of the First Month.

XXIII: *Yayoi's Room at the House of Sisters, Mount Shiranui Shrine*, Minutes before sunrise on the Eighteenth Day of the First Month.

XXIV: *Ogawa Mimasaku's Room at the Ogawa Residence in Nagasaki*, Dawn on the Twenty-first Day of the First Month.

XXV: *The Lord Abbott's Quarters at Mount Shiranui Shrine*, The Twenty-second Night of the First Month.

XXVI: *Behind the Harubayashi Inn, East of Kurozane Village in Kyôga Domain*, The Twenty-second Morning of the First Month.

- III: The Master of Go, *The Seventh Month in the Thirteenth Year of the Era of Kansei*, August, 1800

Subdivided into:

XXVII: *Dejima*, August, 1800.

XXVIII: *Captain Penhaligon's Cabin Aboard HMS Phoebus, East China Sea*, Around three o'clock on the 16<sup>th</sup> October, 1800.

XXIX: *An Uncertain Place*, An uncertain time.

XXX: *The Room of the Last Chrysanthemum at the Magistracy in Nagasaki*, The Second Day of the Ninth Month.

XXXI: *The Forecastle Taffrail of HMS Phoebus*, Ten o'clock sharp on the 18<sup>th</sup> October, 1800.

XXXII: *The Watchtower on Dejima*, A quarter past ten o'clock on the morning of 18<sup>th</sup> October, 1800.

XXXIII: *The Hall of Sixty Mats at the Magistracy*, After Acting-Chief de Zoet's departure on the Second Day of the Ninth Month.

XXXIV: *Captain Penhaligon's Bunk-Room Aboard HMS Phoebus*, Around dawn on the 19<sup>th</sup> October, 1800.

XXXV: *The Sea Room in the Chief's Residence on Dejima*, Morning on the 19<sup>th</sup> October, 1800.

XXXVI: *The Room of the Last Chrysanthemum at the Magistracy*, Hour of the Ox on the Third Day of the Ninth Month.

XXXVII: *From Captain Penhaligon's Cabin*, Around six o'clock in the evening of the 19<sup>th</sup> October, 1800.

XXXVIII: *The Watchtower on Dejima*, Noon on the 20<sup>th</sup> October, 1800.

XXXIX: *From the Veranda of the Room of the Last Chrysanthemum at the Magistracy*, The Ninth Day of the Ninth Month.

- IV: *The Rainy Season*, 1811

Subdivided into:

XL: *Mount Inasa Temple, overlooking Nagasaki Bay*, Morning of Friday the 3<sup>rd</sup> July, 1811.

- V: *The Last Pages*, Autumn, 1817.

Subdivided into:

XLI: *Quarterdeck of the Profetes, Nagasaki Bay*, Monday the 3<sup>rd</sup> November, 1817.

### **Nicholls, David: *Starter For Ten***

Headed by author name on left, book title on right. Divided into four numbered 'Rounds' and an Epilogue, each of which is subdivided into numbered chapters, presented as questions from *Countdown* (each chapter headed by a question and answer). Each Round division page also includes at least one quote.

- Round One

Subdivided into chapters 1 to 8

- Round Two

Subdivided into chapters 9 to 22

- Round Three

Subdivided into chapters 23 to 38

- Final Round

Subdivided into chapters 39 to 42

- Epilogue

Subdivided into chapter 43

**Nicholls, David: *The Understudy***

Headed by author name on left, book title on right. Prefaced by two quotes. Divided into five numbered and subtitled Acts, each subdivided into autonomously titled chapterlets. Each Act division page also includes at least one quote.

- Act One: Waiting To Go On

Subdivided into 'Sunset Boulevard', 'Meet Number 12', 'The Nearly CV', 'The Man In The Black Wool/Lycra-Mix Unitard', 'Kitchen-Sink Drama', 'Cary Grant', 'Fasten Your Seatbelts. It's Going To Be A Bumpy Night.', 'Two Cigarettes At Once', 'Errol Flynn On Antibiotics'.

- Act Two: The Title Role

Subdivided into 'The King Of The World', 'Harrison Ford And The Breakfast Room Of Doom', 'A Mad-Cap Life-Force', 'If I Only Had The Nerve', 'Performance Anxiety', 'The Love Interest'.

- Act Three: The Amazing Adventures Of Nora Schulz

Subdivided into 'New York, New York', 'The Man Of The Year Awards', 'Coffee And Cigarettes', 'Romantic-Comedy Behaviour', 'The Fine Art Of The Double Take', 'The Phantom Of The Opera', 'The Reluctant Bodyguard', 'The Be-Good Voice', 'An Offer You Can't Refuse'.

- Act Four: The Big Break

Subdivided into 'There's No Business Like Show Business', 'The 'F' Word', 'Charisma Lessons', 'My Dinner With Sophie', 'Lauren Bacall', 'The Big White Bed', 'Superman Vs. Sammy The Squirrel', 'Kryptonite', 'Skin Work', 'The Awful Truth', 'Brief Encounter', 'The Invisible Man', 'Diazepam', 'Witness', 'Unresolved Sexual Tension', 'The Big Speech', 'Gunfight At The Idaho Fried Chicken'.

- Act Five: Beginners, Please...

Subdivided into 'A Star In Born', 'The Great Escape', 'White Christmas', 'The Long Goodbye', 'The First Good Luck'.

**Nicholls, David: *One Day***

No header. Prefaced by quote. Divided into x numbered Parts, dated by year content and subtitled by stage of life. Each Part subdivided into numbered chapters, each with subtitle, date subtitle and geographical subtitle. Each Part division page also includes at least one quote. NB: Chapters Six and Seven both covering 1993, with extra subtitles. Part Five has no dated year content or stage of life subtitle, substituting thematically related subheading instead (and functioning as an epilogue).

- Part One: 1988-1992, *Early Twenties*

Subdivided into:

Chapter One: The Future. Friday 15 July 1988. *Rankeillor Street, Edinburgh.*

Chapter Two: Back To Life. Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> July 1989. *Wolverhampton and Rome.*

Chapter Three: The Taj Mahal. Saturday 15 July 1990. *Bombay and Camden Town.*

Chapter Four: Opportunities. Monday 15 July 1991. *Camden Town and Primrose Hill.*

Chapter Five: The Rules of Engagement. Wednesday, 15 July 1992. *The Dodecanese Islands, Greece.*

- Part Two: 1993-1995, *Late Twenties*

Subdivided into:

Chapter Six: Chemical. Thursday 15 July 1993, Part One – Dexter’s Story, *Brixton, Earls Court and Oxfordshire*.

Chapter Seven: G.S.O.H. Thursday, 15 July 1993, Part Two – Emma’s Story, *Covent Garden and King’s Cross*.

Chapter Eight: Showbusiness. Friday 15 July 1994. *Leytonstone and the Isle of Dogs*.

Chapter Nine: Cigarettes and Alcohol. Saturday, 15 July 1995. *Walthamstow and Soho*.

- Part Three: 1996-2001, *Early Thirties*.

Subdivided into:

Chapter Ten: Carpe Diem. Monday 15 July 1996. *Leytonstone and Walthamstow*.

Chapter Eleven: Two Meetings. Tuesday, 15 July 1997. *Soho and the South Bank*.

Chapter Twelve: Saying ‘I Love You’. Wednesday 15 July 1998. *Chichester, Sussex*.

Chapter Thirteen: The Third Wave. Thursday 15 July 1999. *Somerset*.

Chapter Fourteen: Fathering. Saturday 15 July 2000. *Richmond, Surrey*.

Chapter Fifteen: Jean Seberg. Sunday 15 July 2001. *Belleville, Paris*.

- Part Four: 2002-2005, *Late Thirties*

Subdivided into:

Chapter Sixteen: Monday Morning. Monday 15 July 2002. *Belsize Park*.

Chapter Seventeen: bigdayspeech.doc. Tuesday 15 July 2003. *North Yorkshire*.

Chapter Eighteen: The Middle. Thursday 15 July 2004. *Belsize Park*.

- Part Five: Three Anniversaries

Subdivided into:

Chapter Nineteen: The Morning After. Friday 15 July 1988. *Rankeillor Street, Edinburgh*.

Chapter Twenty: The First Anniversary. A Celebration. Friday 15 July 2005. *London and Oxfordshire*.

Chapter Twenty-One: Arthur’s Seat. Friday 15 July 1988. *Rankeillor Street, Edinburgh*.

Chapter Twenty-Two: The Second Anniversary. Unpacking. Saturday 15 July 2006. *North London and Edinburgh*.

Chapter Twenty-Three: The Third Anniversary. Last Summer. Sunday 15 July 2007. *Edinburgh*.

### **Self, Will: *The Quantity Theory of Insanity***

Headed by book title on left and chapter title on right. Table of contents listing six titled sections and corresponding page numbers. Prefaced by a quote. Divided into six titled chapters. NB- ‘The Quantity Theory of Insanity’ is divided into titled chapterlets (stylistics of an academic paper).

The North London Book of the Dead

Ward 9

Understanding the Ur-Bororo

The Quantity Theory of Insanity

Subdivided into two titled chapterlets: ‘Denver, Colorado’ and ‘*Select Bibliography*’

Mono-Cellular

Waiting

**Self, Will: *Cock & Bull***

No header. Table of contents listing the numbered and titled chapter breakdown of two titled sections with corresponding page numbers. NB- 'Epilogue' is not numbered. Divided into two titled sections

- Cock: A Novelette

Subdivided into eight numbered, titled chapters preceded by a quote.

[untitled quote]

1: The Prelude

2: Climbing on Board

3: Frond

4: Dave 2

5: It

6: How One Becomes What One Is

7: The Lager of Lamot

8: The Icing Gun

- Bull: A Farce

Subdivided into five numbered, titled chapters and one titled chapter, preceded by a quote.

[untitled quote]

1: Metamorphosis

2: First Impressions

3: Seduction

4: Pursuit

5: Apotheosis

Epilogue

**Self, Will: *My Idea Of Fun: A Cautionary Tale***

No header. Table of contents listing two numbered and titled Books, titled chapters and numbered and titled chapters with corresponding page numbers. Divided into two numbered, titled Books both with title quote. Book One subdivided into one titled chapter and five numbered, titled sections each with title quote and one titled section with title quote. Book Two subdivided into five numbered, titled sections each with title quote and one titled section with title quote. NB- 'Chapter Eight' subdivided into two chapterlets.

- Book One: The First Person

Subdivided into

Prologue

- Chapter One: What You See is What You Get
- Chapter Two: Crossing the Abyss
- Chapter Three: The Fat Controller
- Chapter Four: My Universities
- Chapter Five: Rehabilitation
- Intermission
- Book Two: The Third Person

- Chapter Six: The Land of Children's Jokes
- Chapter Seven: 'Yum-Yum'
- Chapter Eight: Reenter The Fat Controller

Subdivided into two chapterlets, '[untitled]' and 'Interlude'

- Chapter Nine: The Money Critic
- Chapter Ten: The North London Book of the Dead (Reprise)
- Epilogue: At the Oyster Bar in Grand Central Station

**Self, Will: *Grey Area and other stories***

No header. Table of contents listing nine titled sections and corresponding page numbers. Prefaced by a quote. Divided into nine titled sections, each with individual graphic. NB-'Scale' is subdivided into chapters

- Between the Conceits
- The Indian Mutiny
- A Short History of the English Novel
- Incubus or The Impossibility of Self-Determination as to Desire
- Scale

Subdivided into six chapters and an end quote

Prologue (to be spoken in conversational tones

Kettle

Relative

The Ascent: 'Affected as well as asinine' TLS

To the Bathroom

Lizard: Epilogue. Many years later...

[end quote]

- Chest
- Grey Area
- Inclusion®
- The End of the Relationship

**Self, Will: *The Sweet Smell of Psychosis***

Headed by author name on left and book title on right. Ten illustrations, by Martin Rowson, scattered throughout the narrative. Short book, not divided though does contain untitled chapterlets.

**Self, Will: *Great Apes***

No header. Prefaced by two quotes. Divided into an Author Note and twenty-two chapters.

Author's Note

Chapter One to Twenty-Two

**Self, Will: *Tough, Tough Toys for Tough, Tough Boys***

Headed on left with book title and right with chapter title. Prefaced by a quote. Table of contents listing eight titled chapters with corresponding page numbers. Divided into eight

chapters. NB- 'Flytopia' and 'Design Faults In The Volvo 760 Turbo: A Manual' also contain title quotes. NB- 'Design Faults In The Volvo 760 Turbo: A Manual' and 'The Nonce Prize' are subdivided into chapterlets.

The Rock Of Crack As Big As The Ritz

Flytopia [prefaced by a quote]

A Story For Europe

Dave Too

Caring, Sharing

Tough, Tough Toys For Tough, Tough Boys

Design Faults In The Volvo 760 Turbo: A Manual [prefaced by a quote]

Subdivided into four chapterlets '1. Instruments and Controls', '2. Body and Interior', '3. Starting and Driving', '4. Wheel and Tyres'.

The Nonce Prize

Subdivided into four numbered chapterlets, the fourth of which is also titled: '1.', '2.', '3.', '4. The Nonce Prize'.

### **Self, Will: *How The Dead Live***

No header. Prefaced by a quote. Prefaced by a double page of hand-drawn maps. Divided into three sections, preceded by a chapter.

Epilogue: April 1999

Subdivided into two chapterlets '[untitled]' and 'Christmas 2001'

- Dying

Subdivided into six numbered and dated chapters, NB- 'Chapter One: April 1988' is also dated:

Chapter One: April 1988

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

- Dead

Subdivided into five numbered chapters

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Subdivided into two chapterlets '[untitled]' and 'Christmas 2001'

Chapter Nine

Subdivided into two chapterlets '[untitled]' and 'Christmas 2001'

Chapter Ten

Subdivided into two chapterlets '[untitled]' and 'Christmas 2001'

Chapter Eleven

Subdivided into two chapterlets '[untitled]' and 'Christmas 2001'

- Deader

Subdivided into five numbered chapters

Chapter Twelve



Subdivided into two chapterlets '[untitled]' and 'Christmas 2001'

Chapter Thirteen

Subdivided into two chapterlets '[untitled]' and 'Christmas 2001'

Chapter Fourteen

Subdivided into two chapterlets '[untitled]' and 'Christmas 2001'

Chapter Fifteen

Subdivided into two chapterlets '[untitled]' and 'Christmas 2001'

Chapter Sixteen

Subdivided into two chapterlets '[untitled]' and 'Christmas 2001'

### **Self, Will: *Dorian: An Imitation***

No header. Prefaced by a quote. Divided into three numbered, titled sections, each subdivided into numbered chapters. NB- 'Part Three: *Network*' also contains a titled 'Epilogue' with a quote.

- Part One: *Recordings*

Subdivided into numbered chapters 1-5

- Part Two: *Transmission*

Subdivided into numbered chapters 6-12

- Part Three: *Network*

Subdivided into numbered chapters 13-18 and 'Epilogue'. The latter also titled with a quote.

### **Self, Will: *Dr Mukti and other tales of woe***

No header. Table of contents listing five titled sections with corresponding page numbers. Divided into five titled sections. NB- 'Dr Mukti' subdivided into chapters. NB- 'The Five-swing Walk' contains a quote on the section page.

- Dr Mukti

Subdivided into six chapters, five of which are titled numerically:

[untitled]

Part One

Part Two

Part Three

Part Four

Part Five

- 161
- The Five-swing Walk

Includes a quote on the section page

- Conversations with Ord
- Return to the Planet of the Humans

### **Self, Will: *The Book of Dave: A Revelation of the Recent Past and the Distant Future***

Headed by section title on left and date on right. Prefaced by a quote. Prefaced by two double-pages of hand-drawn maps. Table of contents listing sixteen numbered, titled and

dated sections with corresponding page numbers. Glossary at end. Divided into sixteen numbered, titled and dated sections.

- 1 The Hack's Party: JUN 523 AD
- 2 Trapping a Flyer: December 2001
- 3 The Geezer: SEP 509-10 AD
- 4 The Family of Man: June 1987
- 5 The Exile: OCT 523 AD
- 6 The Skip Tracer: April 2002
- 7 Broken on the Wheel 510-13 AD
- 8 The Shmeiss Ponce: September 1992
- 9 The Lawyer of Chil: Kipper 523-4 AD
- 10 The Riddle: August 2002
- 11 The Forbidden Zone: Kipper 522 AD
- 12 The Book of Dave: October 2000
- 13 New London: MAR 524 AD
- 14 Getting Out from Behind the Wheel: February 2003
- 15 The Moto Slaughter: JUN 524 AD
- 16 Made in China: October 2003

## **Glossary**

### **Self, Will: *The Butt: An Exit Strategy***

No header. Prefaced by a quote. Divided into 16 numbered chapters and a titled epigraph.

1-16

The Butt End

### **Self, Will: *Liver: A Fictional Organ with a Surface Anatomy of Four Lobes***

Subtitle does not appear on cover. Subtitle appears on inner title page. Prefaced by a quote page. Table of contents listing four titles and corresponding page numbers. Divided into four titled sections, one of which is subdivided into eight titled chapters.

- *Foie Humain*
- *Leberknödel*

Subdivided into eight titled chapters:

Introitus

Kyrie

Sequentia

Offertorium

Sanctus

Benedictus

Agnus Dei

Communio

- Prometheus
- Birdy Num Num

### **Smith, Ali: *Free Love and other stories***

Headed by book title on left and section title on right. Table of contents with twelve unnumbered, titled sections and corresponding page numbers. Divided into twelve titled chapters. NB- 'To the cinema' subdivided into four numbered chapterlets.

Free love

A story of folding and unfolding

Text for the day

A quick one

Jenny Robertson your friend is not coming

To the cinema: subdivided into four numbered chapterlets 'I', 'II', 'III', 'IV'

The touching of wood

Cold iron

College

Scary

The unthinkable happens to people every day

The world with love

### **Smith, Ali: *Like***

No header. Prefaced by five quotes. Divided into two, titled sections. Each section subdivided into seven untitled, unnumbered chapters.

- Amy

Subdivided into seven untitled, unnumbered chapters

- Ash

Subdivided into seven untitled, unnumbered chapters

### **Smith, Ali: *Other Stories and other stories***

No header. Table of contents with twelve unnumbered, titled sections and corresponding page numbers. Prefaced by a quote. Divided into twelve titled sections, each with individual lightbulb graphic.

- god's gift
- the hanging girl
- blank card
- more than one story
- small deaths
- virtual
- okay so far
- miracle survivors
- the theme is power
- instructions for pictures of heaven
- kasia's mother's mother's story
- a story of love

### **Smith, Ali: *Hotel World***

No header. Prefaced by five quotes. Divided into six titled sections. Untitled end self-quote.

- past
- present historic
- future conditional
- perfect
- future in the past
- present
- [untitled end self-quote]

**Smith, Ali: *The Whole Story and other stories***

No header. Tables of contents with twelve unnumbered, titled sections and corresponding page numbers. Prefaced by a quote. Divided into twelve titled chapters. NB- 'Erosive' is subdivided into four chapterlets.

the universal story

gothic

being quick

may

paradise

erosive: subdivided into '[untitled]', 'middle', 'end', 'beginning'

the book club

believe me

scottish love songs

the shortlist season

the heat of the story

the start of things

**Smith, Ali: *The Accidental***

No header. Prefaced by five quotes. Opening, untitled, unnumbered chapter. Divided into three titled sections, each subdivided into untitled, unnumbered chapters.

- [untitled chapter]
- The beginning

Subdivided into five untitled, unnumbered chapters

- The middle

Subdivided into twelve untitled, unnumbered chapters

- The end

Subdivided into five untitled, unnumbered chapters

**Smith, Ali: *Girl Meets Boy***

Headed by author name on left and book title on right. Prefaced by five quotes. Divided into five, titled sections.

- I
- you
- us
- them
- all together now

**Thomas, Scarlett: *PopCo***

No header. Divided into three numbered Parts, each with quote. Parts subdivided into numbered Chapterlets (titled Chapters, but run on in text rather than starting new page). After 'Part Three', book continues with crossword, letter table, recipe, number table. End section, 'Solution' has subtitle and title quote. NB- Part Three also contains subtitled 'Postscript'.

- Part One

Subdivided into Chapters One to Nine

- Part Two

Subdivided into Chapters Ten to Twenty

- Part Three

Subdivided into Chapters Twenty-one to Twenty-nine and a 'Postscript' (in same chapterlet run-on)

- [Crossword- untitled]
- 'Frequency of Occurrence of Letters in English'
- '*Let Them Eat Cake* cake'
- 'The First 1000 Primes'
- 'Solution'

**Thomas, Scarlett: *The End of Mr. Y***

No header. Prefaced by two quotes. Divided into three numbered Parts, each with at least one quote. Parts subdivided into numbered Chapters.

- Part One

Subdivided into Chapters One to Eight

- Part Two

Subdivided into Chapters Nine to Eighteen

- Part Three

Subdivided into Chapters Nineteen to Twenty-seven and an 'Epilogue'

**Thomas, Scarlett: *Our Tragic Universe***

No header. Prefaced by three quotes. Divided into two numbered Parts, each with a quote. Parts subdivided into unnumbered, untitled chapterlets.

- Part One
- Part Two

**Torday, Paul: *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen***

No header. Chapters subdivided into emails, memos, letters, interviews and reports.

- Table of Contents, listing the thirty-three numbered and subtitled extracts with corresponding page numbers.
- Alternative title-page for the book: 'Extracts from a Return to an Address of the Honourable House of Commons by the Foreign Affairs Committee and a Report into the Circumstances surrounding the decision to introduce salmon into the Yemen (Yemen Salmon Fishing Project), and the subsequent events.'

Subdivided into:

- 1: The origins of the Yemen Salmon Project
- 2: Extracts from the diary of Dr Alfred Jones: his wedding anniversary
- 3: Feasibility of introducing salmon into the Yemen
- 4: Extracts from the diary of Dr Alfred Jones: his meeting with Sheikh Muhammad
- 5: Extracts from the diary of Dr Alfred Jones: marital issues may have clouded his judgement
- 6: Correspondence between Captain Robert Matthews and Ms Harriet Chetwode-Talbot
- 7: Press comment
- 8: Intercepts of al-Qaeda email traffic
- 9: Interview with Peter Maxwell, director of communications, prime minister's office
- 10: Interview with the prime minister, the Rt Hon. Jay Vent MP, on BBC1 *The Politics Show*
- 11: Continuation of interview with Peter Maxwell
- 12: Email correspondence between David Sugden, NCFE, and Mr Tom Price-Williams, head of fisheries Environment Agency
- 13: Extracts from the diary of Dr Alfred Jones: his return to Glen Tulloch
- 14: Interview with Alfred Dr Jones: his meeting with Mr Peter Maxwell and Sheikh Muhammad
- 15: Peter Maxwell is interviewed for the 'Time Off' column of the *Sunday Telegraph*, 4 September
- 16: Interview with Ms Harriet Chetwode-Talbot
- 17: Extract from *Hansard*
- 18: The termination of the employment contract of Dr Jones
- 19: Correspondence between Captain Robert Matthews and Ms Harriet Chetwode-Talbot
- 20: Intercepts of al-Qaeda email traffic
- 21: Extract from *Hansard*
- 22: Extracts from the diary of Dr Alfred Jones: he visits the Yemen
- 23: Extract from *Hansard*
- 24: Correspondence between Ms Chetwode-Talbot and herself
- 25: Extract from Peter Maxwell's unpublished autobiography, *A Helmsman at the Ship of State*
- 26: Script of TV pilot for *Prizes for the People*
- 27: Extract from Peter Maxwell's unpublished autobiography
- 28: Evidence of a marital crisis between Dr and Mrs Jones
- 29: Interview with Dr Alfred Jones: dinner at the Ritz
- 30: Dr Jones fails to find a date in his diary to meet Mrs Jones
- 31: Extract from Peter Maxwell's unpublished autobiography
- 32: Dr Jones's testimony of events which occurred at the launch of the Yemen salmon project
- 33: Conclusions of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee
  - Glossary of terms used in the extracts

**Torday, Paul: *The Irresistible Inheritance of Wilberforce: A Novel in Four Vintages***

Prefaced by a quote. Divided into four sections, titled by year. Each section subdivided into five numbered chapters.

- 2006

Subdivided into chapters One to Five

- 2004

Subdivided into chapters One to Five

- 2003

Subdivided into chapters One to Five

- 2002

Subdivided into chapters One to Five

**Torday, Paul: *The Girl on the Landing***

No subtitle. No header. Prefaced by a graphic of birds flying. Divided into nineteen chapters, eighteen of which are numbered and titled, one of which is titled.

1: The Picture

2: There Was Something Different about Michael

3: Mr Patel's Membership Application

4: The Hill of the Rowan Tree

5: Serendipozan

6: Strangers on a Train

7: You Think You Know Someone, but You Never Really Do

8: She Left Her Glass of Wine Untouched

9: 'Nothing I can't handle'

10: He Shot out into the Street and Disappeared

11: I Smelled the Blood

12: Their Brains Are Not Like Ours

13: Rule Britannia!

14: While the Cat's Away

15: Her Black Gaze Made Me Shudder in My Sleep

16: He Could Run for Days in Pursuit of His Prey

17: Forgotten but Not Gone

18: It's about Survival, Not Love

Epilogue

## Appendix B

- |   |                  |
|---|------------------|
| • Interview 1 – Jane Smith <sup>197</sup> | 10 December 2009 |
| • Interview 2 – Dr Ailsa Cox              | 26 January 2010  |
| • Interview 3 – Sarah Hall                | 11 May 2010      |
| • Interview 4 – Tania Hershman            | 15 January 2010  |

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<sup>197</sup> Name has been changed, as requested by interviewee.



## Interview 1: Jane Smith<sup>198</sup>

Interviewed by Victoria Adams (in person), 10 December 2009

**VA: In your view, how much has changed on the market since the publication of the research in 2004 as part of the Save Our Short Story Campaign?**

JS: There are definitely some good things that have happened. Turn to *The Bookseller* today, to the March Preview, and here is a distinct section called ‘Literary Short Stories’ that did not exist five years ago. You would not have had *The Bookseller* previewing collections of short stories separately. Both these collections that are coming out in March – as an example – are by pretty well known authors. One’s Haneif Kureishi with Faber and the other is Amy Bloom (an American writer) and that’s coming out with Granta. I think that it’s very positive that they’re being separated out from Fiction generally and that Granta and Faber are both publishing these collections.

For any new writer to come forward with a debut collection of short stories it’s still a really, really difficult market. It would be very rare for publishers to be receptive – and I’m talking about mainstream publishers now and the bigger independents. If you went to publishers like Salt you’ve got a better chance of success. Or a publisher based in Scotland like Two Ravens Press. Their expectations of how many they’ll sell is obviously going to be pretty low – it’ll be a very realistic low figure – but at least it allows that debut writer to have some sort of platform.

**VA: Do you think that short story collections receiving lower advances than, for example, novels is also true of independents – the smaller independent presses as well as the larger ones? Your research suggests it’s about the third of the advance an author would receive for a novel.**

JS: The advance situation has changed so much in the last year: advances have gone down across the board. I would think the situation for a short story collection with the smaller independents is: would they get an advance, or would they be on a royalty-only basis? It’s quite likely there wouldn’t even be an advance and if there was an advance it would probably be something in the region of five hundred pounds

**VA: You represent Sara Maitland who last night had a great success in being the runner up for the BBC National Short story prize with her story ‘The Moss Witch’. For somebody who is known for writing short fiction – such as Sara Maitland – do you think the situation is different?**

JS: It’s not vastly different. Sara on the whole tends to handle her short fiction herself. We had a conversation – a grown-up conversation – about it when I started to represent

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<sup>198</sup> Name has been changed, as requested by interviewee.

her and she said that it was probably best for her just to deal directly. Maia Press brought out her last collection – which was *Far North* – and that would have had, of any collection, a greater chance of success because there was a film tie-in (also called *Far North*) which had art-house release last year. The cover of the collection was a still from the film. But she handled that herself and it was a small publisher who did it.

Originally ‘The Moss Witch’ was commissioned by Ra Page at Comma Press. Comma Press have a very interesting list and they are actively commissioning stories on particular themes in a way that *Serpent’s Tail* did, though I’m not sure that they’re still doing it quite so much. But if you get a really energetic editor like that who has got a good spark of an idea for a collection that can still work well.

**VA: Do you think there’s a difference between a commissioned short story and a short story that an author sits down and writes by themselves?**

JS: Often with a commissioned short story you’ll persuade a writer who hadn’t thought of taking that time out of their writing life – if they’re a novelist or a non-fiction writer – to sit down and do it. It was interesting to hear Kate Clanchy saying that she was inspired that her entry would be read by Helen Dunmore. She also said that it was only her second short story. Now, would she have written that – off her own back – without the incentive of the competition, or a commission? Maybe not.

**VA: In an interview in *The Guardian* – as a result of winning – she did say that she was inspired by wanting to go off and finish up another piece of short fiction she’d been vaguely working on for a couple of years. So, the idea of having a known readership I suppose is a difference. In your role as an agent you mentioned before that you’ve not actually sold many short story collections.**

JS: No, we haven’t. I’ve got writers who write longer length fiction and short fiction and I’ve managed to place two short story collections in seven years: both with small Scottish independents. I tried extremely hard for a very good writer whose work has been on regularly on BBC radio, who has regularly been anthologised – so there’s a validation there of her short stories – but we just could not get her short story collection taken on.

**VA: It’s a real pity. Do you think it’s important for short stories to be published commercially?**

JS: Very, to encourage authors. It’s really hard for authors – if they’re not getting feedback, if they’re not getting their work validated by publication – to just be sitting and writing for various competitions in the hope that perhaps they’re going to be placed. It’s a very hard thing to do. I think that publication is very important. It’s really important to the readership that we’ve got a variety of authorship and not just American short story writers – very fine as many of them are – that we’ve got access to other voices in short story collections or as single short stories.

**VA: Do you think the situation is better in America than in Britain for short stories?**

JS: It has been and there are still a number of journals that are taking short stories. Not as many as there were but they do still exist in a way that there are very few opportunities of here.

**VA: What about the rest of the world?**

JS: I think there's not quite such a stigma against the short story in other places. Just look at how many brilliant short story writers have come out of Canada and who have continued to get publication.

**VA: Alice Munro won The Booker this year despite being 'just a short story writer' I think was one of the quotes that everybody took umbrage with. Why do you think short fiction doesn't sell?**

JS: When we did the research – and I think it probably still holds true – it was really interesting to hear that it's all along the line. A bookshop manager would say that if they were being pitched a short story volume by a publisher's rep, they'd talk about every single other book that they've got coming out and then say [glum voice] 'oh, and we've got these short stories' just like that, the also-rans. If you've got that right at the end of that food chain but before the consumer gets it, how're you going to muster enthusiasm for it? Especially the way bookselling is going now. Perhaps it may be different with this new breed of independents because they're going into it for the love of it. It was really interesting in London just the last two days seeing a number of these independent booksellers: short stories stand, I would think, a much better chance in their shops than they do in the likes of Waterstones.

**VA: Why is that?**

JS: Are publishers going to spend promotional money on putting short story collections in 3-for-2's? Or at the front of the shop? No, they're not. The percentage of the people who actually make it to the back of the shop where they might find the short stories is relatively few. That's how this whole idea of promoting the short story collection as if it was a novel – linked short stories – came about: so they could get it further forward into the shop.

**VA: Do you think it has been a successful technique?**

JS: It has been for certain books. It's really interesting, the way people want to read short stories: the research five years ago showed a lot of people felt that they didn't want to read short story collections because – against what we'd normally be thinking, we think 'oh people are so busy short stories are perfect' – the research came back and said people with their shorter time don't want to invest in a whole new set of characters and

circumstances and locations and find that five thousand words later it was over and then there's another new set of circumstances and all the rest of it in the next short story. It's just really interesting hearing from readers what they're looking for. The short story as a single entity is a much better concept and proposition for readers.

**VA: If that's true then why do you think people want to publish their work as collections?**

JS: How else are they going to get a name? How else does a writer build their career? They don't build their careers by having single short stories scattered – one on Radio 4, one in an anthology edited with lots of other short stories, or one in *Prospect Magazine*. It's not enough; it's not a foundation to build your name and then get invited to literature festivals, et cetera.

**VA: So people need something they can hold in their hands and keep on their shelves to invest that kind of respect into an author?**

JS: I think so, yes.

**VA: We talked before that America has had a stronger past. What is it about Britain that makes it harder to publish a short story collection as a commercial success? Or at all, in fact?**

JS: We have been enslaved by the novel in the UK: it has been the predominant literary form and that has increased over the last twenty years.

**VA: When you are selling books to publishers do you sell much apart from novels? You mentioned you've placed two short story collections – what about non-fiction and essays?**

JS: Essays, again, are really hard to place and on the whole the general received wisdom is that the UK is not really interested in essays as a published book though you can still sometimes place them in newspapers, sometimes magazines. Non-fiction has been extremely strong. I started off as a literary agent in 2002 and started off selling quite a lot of Literary Fiction. Then about 2004-2005 Literary Fiction started to be much more difficult and I started to do a lot more Literary Non-Fiction. Books like Sara Maitland's *Book of Silence* and *Corvus* by Esther Woolfson and biographies: it has been a very healthy time for non-fiction until this year [laughs]. Publishers are feeling that it's very difficult to sell History and it's extremely difficult to sell Memoir, unless it's the right kind of Memoir. The bottom has fallen out of Celebrity Memoir – which everybody will obviously say is a good thing, anybody with taste will say is a good thing – but it has hit publishers very hard.

**VA: Do you think that's the rise and fall of different trends?**

JS: Yes

**VA: Is it at all linked in with what's happening in society, with the recession and so forth?**

JS: There's a lot of talk about whether in recession we're looking for more escapism. But of course in recession there are a lot of books about being thrifty and [laughs] making do and everything else. There has been a huge surge in that kind of book and mind/body/spirit seem to be doing well again. But if you look at the graphs of sales, this time last year non-fiction was outselling fiction and suddenly the situation is reversed this year. It can't only be due to Dan Brown—it's in there, of course, but you know...

**VA: Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series.**

JS: Yes!

**VA: Why do you think Literary Fiction fell out of favour in 2005?**

JS: It was happening before that, I was probably just insulated from it for the first few years. The rise of the Richard and Judy Book Club is definitely a factor and it promoted a kind of accessible Literary Fiction or upmarket Commercial Fiction or 'Smart Fiction': there is a particular sort of book that did particularly well with Richard and Judy. We had one here ourselves – *Salmon Fishing In The Yemen* – which did brilliantly well. It was the kind of fiction that publishers became interested in; the sort of fiction that bookgroups responded to very readily. At the same time there's the change in book selling patterns so that more book sales are going through supermarkets, the demise of Ottakars – who were champions of Literary Fiction – troubles at Waterstones who, again, had been great champions of Literary Fiction. And the demands of 'how do you promote a new writer?': unless you are going to take a huge gamble with a new writer and make them front-list and therefore spend big bucks on them and try to make them into some sort of brand...

If you look up there [indicates row of Paul Torday books on shelf] at the way Orion have promoted Paul Torday you'll see that they've put a 'look' onto each of his books so that people can – with the noise of everything else happening – recognise that and hone in on it. For a debut Literary writer it's really hard: how many copies might they sell?

**VA: Is it because they lack a recognition in the market already?**

JS: Yes, because they want authors to become...

**VA: Celebrities?**

JS: Not celebrities but recognisable, because it is very difficult—when you’ve got limited shelfspace— to differentiate between all those books. And if for a book your best hope is that it might sell two thousand copies...

**VA: They’re not going to put the effort into it?**

JS: They aren’t. It’s really, really hard. The prizes are very important for short fiction as well, to give new oxygen to a book that has been out for a while and probably hasn’t been as noticed. The other thing that’s happening of course is the Review pages have been squeezed and there’s no longer as many review slots as there were. With the newspapers struggling they’re no longer paying as much for freelance reviewers to review books and often, therefore, if you look in the Scottish Press you’re finding syndicated reviews – say a round-up of Crime books—bought in from *The Evening Standard* or another newspaper, because it’s much cheaper to do that. There’s not the variety that you once had. It’s just really hard, a really hard climate.

**VA: Talking of the Richard and Judy Bookclub, one of the books on their list is one of the books I’m using for part of my research – David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* – which I think would definitely come under the category of books which are in some way borrowing from the short story form or are a collection themselves. Do you think that the hybridity there – between the novel and the short story – is a feature of what you termed ‘Smart Literature’?**

JS: Not on the whole, no. I think that was an unusual one. It’s a brilliant, brilliant book—wonderfully literary in a way that some of the Richard and Judy books were and persuaded people to have a go. *Gideon Mack* I would not have said was one of the easiest reads but it’s fantastic that they chose something like that. I think it’s a feature of a number of writers— including some of my own writers—to write like that. but I don’t think it’s a feature of Smart Fiction on the whole.

**VA: Would you say it’s more of a Literary Fiction phenomenon to mess about with forms?**

JS: Oh definitely, yes. Just look at early Janice Galloway.

**VA: With all the floating text round the edges.**

JS: They take a risk in that way.

**VA: Do you think that can alienate the reader on occasion?**

JS: It might alienate some readers, but for younger readers I wouldn’t think it was any problem at all.

**VA: Why is that?**

JS: Because you're just much more innovative, aren't you [laughs] at your age. You're just much more open.

**VA: So it's too do with being young rather than with being part of, say, the internet generation?**

JS: Probably the internet generation as well, but more conventional readers on the whole tend to be the older readers.

**VA: You get set in your ways once you get past a certain number of books?**

JS: Not everybody, of course. It's a vast generalisation.

**VA: You said you thought it was good in *The Bookseller* that there's a separate section for Literary Short Stories rather than having them in with General Fiction. Why do you think it's important to have them separately?**

JS: Because it highlights them, because otherwise they'd just be right in there in amongst Fiction. It's looking slim for next year because fewer titles are being published, but the fact that they're being highlighted as a different form I think is good. In the same way you get Crime and Thriller and Historical separated out.

**VA: If somebody came to you and said 'I have a fantastic collection of short stories, they're really strongly themed: they're practically a novel' then would that still come under your 'I don't want short stories' banner on your website or is that something you'd consider?**

JS: I think we'd read it.

**VA: And then decide – assuming it was well written, of course.**

JS: If it were absolutely outstanding then of course we'd be interested. I do handle two writers who are also poets and I try to help them as best I can, but really if there's no advance or only a tiny advance they're much better going to the publisher directly themselves. There are recognisable publishers who're going to do poetry and if the advance is going to be two hundred pounds why should I take twelve and a half percent of that? It's much better they make that connection themselves. That's almost the situation – as we've talked about—with Sara Maitland, that she would just handle that herself. I know that's true of a Short story writer who was recently up for a Saltire prize: she didn't go through a London agent, she negotiated the deal herself.

**VA: You represent some Crime writers on your list and Crime and Detective Fiction writers are well known for publishing in series and building up huge brand loyalty amongst readership. If you're reading a book that's part of a series, how do you think that differs from a stand-alone book of fiction?**

JS: As a reading experience? As we were talking about with the investment in character and location – that continues from book to book and it certainly helps publishers. What they're looking for is a book a year from those Crime writers. They're keeping them in the public eye by perhaps publishing them in hardback in March and then they'll bring out a trade-paperback version a few months later, then the mass-market paperback about the same time as the next hardback will come out: it's continually moving.

**VA: And they already know what they're selling?**

JS: Yes.

**VA: Do you think that kind of brand investment comes into Literary Fiction as well? Do you find many of your writers writing repeating characters or setting or a strong voice that carries from book to book?**

JS: Probably the strong voice but not in terms of character. It's quite unusual to have a series outside of Crime or outside of Children's. Children's is very well known for writers like Darren Shan or the Skulduggery Pleasant series. Recently there's obviously Harry Potter. Some publishers try it but with Chick Lit rather than... is there an example you can think of with Literary Fiction?

**VA: *Lord of The Rings*?**

JS: [laughs] Yes.

**VA: I'm thinking slightly of Will Self, who doesn't do series of books but all of his Literary Fiction is set in the same recognisable reality where you've got recurring characters and very strongly recurring themes and lots of links between the books but they're all sideways links rather than a direct chronology.**

JS: I've never read any Will Self so I couldn't comment [laughs]. But Science Fiction does this as well.

**VA: Somebody like Terry Pratchett?**

JS: Yes.



**VA: Do you think it would be easier for you to sell Literary Fiction if there were more series, more recurring characters et cetera in the way that you find with Crime?**

JS: My feeling is that it doesn't work like that.

**VA: Why not?**

JS: It's just a different way of writing and it's a different sort of author who tackles that; they usually say what they want to say about the characters, the situation in that one book as an entity rather than to be continued in any way.

**VA: Do you think Literary Fiction is less plot-driven?**

JS: It varies hugely. If you're going to try to nail down what Literary Fiction is then it's about the style and the writing and it's about plot, whereas Commercial Fiction is about narrative drive – the plot, story.

**VA: At the expense, perhaps, of the style?**

JS: Yes.

**VA: Do you think that Alice Munro winning the Man Booker this year, a Short story collection winning the Guardian First Book award and at that award ceremony Claire Armistead calling 2009 'The Year of The Short story' will have any tangible effect on the industry?**

JS: I think it'll probably make editors a bit more sympathetic. But then editors are being made redundant and publishers are cutting their lists by as much as a third. Whether they're going to have the space on their lists for short story writers in the present circumstances... if it had been 'The Year of the Short story' back in 2002 you could have maybe seen a steady graph, but things are so uncertain at the moment that we might see good but odd examples of short stories popping up in publishers' lists. I wouldn't say that it's going to be a trend.

**VA: Do you think that the rise of the digital aspect of publishing—e-readers, wider internet access—is going to affect how people read and access books?**

JS: Definitely [laughs]

**VA: As an agent, how does that affect your role?**

JS: There's still no definitive way forward with all of this but when we're licensing the e-book rights we tend to license them just for two years and then there's a general

recognition that we'll revisit it in two years when – whether it's the Sony e-reader or the Kindle or an i-tablet as is being discussed at the moment – is going to be the way forward, and also about how the pricing works out. To begin with we were selling e-book rights of fifty percent to go to the writer and now publishers are trying to hammer that down to fifteen percent. We're trying to get an industry standard of twenty to twenty-five percent. All that's being hammered out on a daily basis at the moment so we don't want to say 'no, our author's books aren't available': we want to make them available – obviously – but we want to revisit it in a few years time.

**VA: What do you think of a format similar to the iTunes effect on the music industry where rather than buying an entire album of music people can download single tracks – could you imagine people doing that by downloading separate chapters of a book?**

JS: I don't know about separate chapters of a book, it's more likely that the publishers are going to give, say, the first two chapters free as a way to entice readers. I can see for short stories that there might be a really wonderful way forward. If you've got fifty-nine pence you might just – like for an iPod app – give that a go.

**VA: What about for novellas?**

JS: Yes, in the same way. It might help to overcome some of the reservations about novellas. The received wisdom is that you can sell a novel but it has got to be at least sixty thousand words because it has got to look sizable on the shelf. Otherwise people don't want to buy something that doesn't look good value for money, even though publishers use lots of tricks like big typeface and thick paper. But it would be a very rare consumer who scrolled ahead and said 'oh, it's only thirty thousand words, I'm not going to bother.'

**VA: I suppose without the limitation of print-run costs one could say a pound for a story, four pounds for a novella and eight pounds for a novel – pricing on a size ratio rather than people being unwilling to pay £8.99 for all three of those and going always for the largest, for the novel.**

JS: Have you looked at that Shortbread site, by the way? [[www.shortbreadstories.co.uk](http://www.shortbreadstories.co.uk)] It's an author called Robin Pilcher who runs it and they have short stories. They get lots of people writing who aren't short story writers or established short story writers. They allow people to vote on their favourite short stories and then the best ones rise to the top. Sandy McCall Smith has got some on there. At the moment they're free.

**VA: Free is good! Creative Writing courses have been hugely on the increase in the UK and for prose tend to focus on the short story simply because it's easier to teach and assess and read out in class due to its length rather than, perhaps, ease of writing. Has that changed the kind of submissions you've been receiving?**

JS: No it hasn't. I think most creative writing students, in my experience, hold back until they've got a novel.

**VA: Have you noticed any changes in the type of writing that you're being sent?**

JS: With creative writing? Yes, much more polished, much better presented submissions than the norm. And also the fact that as a creative writing student you'll often be able to use testimonies from tutors, which helps for that extra validation. I've taken on quite a number of writers from the Glasgow course and certainly I've spoken quite regularly with St Andrews and Edinburgh Universities as well.

**VA: Do you see it as a positive phenomenon in British culture that more and more people are taking creative writing courses?**

JS: I think they've got to examine why they're taking them. As education – self-education – they're fantastic, you learn so much on these courses: they're hard, really hard, and fascinating. But if your motivation is to get published...

**VA: Then they're not so useful?**

JS: Well, how many people get published as a result of the courses? It was amazing when that Manchester Metropolitan course started with – was it twelve students? – and seven had publishing deals before the end of the year. The hit rate was very high, I think, at Glasgow initially. But these were pioneer courses and it's much more difficult now.

**VA: Do you think there's something to be said about the kind of people willing to take a risk on the first year of a course, that they were perhaps quite dedicated writers in the first place?**

JS: Yes. But there are other really good ways of learning the craft of writing: the Arvon courses can be really good. So again sitting here, receiving submissions, if someone has been on an Arvon course as if someone has been on another creative writing course, it shows that they're really serious and want to learn more.

**VA: What's your view on experimental fiction—the weird and wonderful postmodern writing that comes out? I'm thinking of things like B S Johnson's novel-in-a-box where you could read each page and chapter at will, whichever random order you wanted to shuffle in.**

JS: Fantastic. Is it commercial? No. But absolutely fantastic and really essential that people continue to be experimental.

**VA: Do you worry that the publishing industry does not encourage people to experiment in that way? Or do you think that's something that's separate?**

JS: I think it's separate. I spent six or seven years as Head of Literature at the Scottish Arts Council and there, of course, your view of new writing is different: you're welcoming poetry as much as short stories and actually having very little to do with non-fiction. Very much focussed on Literary Fiction. And there are grants available to help new writers and established writers write that kind of work. But publishers have got to publish what they think they can make money from: it's an industry. All through this interview I've been quite nostalgic for the way things were, but we're in a new situation and we've got to respond to that. Readers have got to respond and writers have got to respond, agents have and publishers to work out how we can get the best books into the hands of readers. Whether it's an e-book or a download or whatever.

**VA: What role do you see the title of the book playing?**

JS: It's more important than you think. Over half the books that I deal with change title.

**VA: Who makes that decision?**

JS: Usually the publisher.

**VA: How does the author normally feel about that?**

JS: Well, sometimes they feel very strongly against it but then you have to be realistic and actually trust the publisher. Sometimes they're wrong, but they've got to think what is going to attract the reader? What is going to sum up the book? Because you've got this one, quick chance to sell a book and if you've got the wrong title which is off-putting... I was trying to sell a Crime novel recently and it was called *Pater Familias*. The publisher said 'It's Latin, it's just going to be off-putting to seventy-five percent of the population.' So it has changed title.

**VA: That's such a pity! It seems such a good title and after all it's a well-known Latin phrase...**

JS: I know, I know...

**VA: Do you think that the title is only about selling the book, or does it have an effect on the reader beyond choosing which book they're going to buy? I'm thinking if they're reading a book which sounds quite romantic – from the title – and it actually turns out to be Slasher/Crime Fiction.**

JS: It's not just the title: it's the whole package of how it's presented. This is a pretty extreme example, but I handled a memoir called *Mother's Ruin*. About how alcohol

affected the whole family. [hands VA copy of original edition] I think that's a very nicely put together package and it's saying that it's a certain sort of book. And it didn't sell sufficiently well. So when they re-packaged it [goes to fetch re-worked edition]

**VA: [describing original edition into tape-recorder] Has the title – *Mother's Ruin*—in red, italic handwriting with the author's name below. The tag-line 'The extraordinary true story of how alcohol destroys a family' and a picture of a young child with striking eyes.**

JS: And they repackaged that for the supermarket. [hands VA copy of re-worked edition]. Now I think that's misleading, actually, because I think that's showing it's a certain sort of book: classic, white background, child's face.

**VA: And you've got the child crying rather than simply looking confused.**

JS: Exactly: they've repackaged it as a Misery Memoir. Of course there are quite miserable elements to this [taps book] but there's a redemption at the end. And this is a real picture of Nicola. But they did that for the supermarkets and I think that would be very misleading for a number of reasons. It wasn't the title – they kept the title.

**VA: This one looks like Literary Fiction [indicates first book] and this one looks like Sensation [indicates second book].**

JS: Exactly.

**VA: And this version sold, the second version?**

JS: It sold pretty well. It's still selling. But it was very disappointing to us. Very. That those decisions were taken. We didn't have a huge amount of power.

**VA: I was about to ask what kind of say you get.**

JS: You can object. And the editor was unhappy about it.

**VA: Who would have taken that decision?**

JS: Sales. A decision to take on a book is no longer an editor feeling very enthusiastic and persuading her colleagues and saying 'I've found this fantastic writer, dah dah dah'. She or he would have to go to an acquisitions meeting having already got the support of sales, the support of marketing, the support of publicity—and if they're looking for world rights, the support of the rights department about how many copies they think they can sell the rights to other countries. For a debut writer that's really hard.

**VA: Because they can't back up and say 'well, my last book sold this many copies' and claim an active, captive audience?**

JS: Yes. The other thing is, here's your BookScan rating on each one. That's the other fact I meant to mention when talking about reviews. Publishers now are actually in thrall to these Nielson BookScan ratings. If you bring out a book with Salt and it sells five hundred copies – which could be good sales for debut short fiction – you're no longer a debut writer. So your next book, one of the questions your publisher will ask is how many did your last book sell? They'll be able to go straight to the Nielson figures themselves and see 'oh dear, it only sold such and such', It's easier for them to promote a brand-new author than it is for somebody who maybe had very good reviews but tiny sales.

**VA: Why is that?**

JS: Because of this Nielson BookScan. And they're no longer able to say it's debut, no longer able to say 'I've got this really fresh, interesting, exciting author. It's their first book, dah de dah de dah.' The classic way of building an author would be to take them on and maybe their third or fourth book they've learnt their apprenticeship, built up a bit of a readership and broken through. The classic example of that is Andrea Levy. Headline published four or five books before *Small Island*—thank god they stuck with her! But would that happen now? I'm not sure it would.

**VA: If a debut author doesn't sell spectacularly and they get relegated to the mid-list, what future do you think they would have?**

JS: They could change their name.

**VA: They would have to do something that drastic?**

JS: Yes. Or another publisher could take them on with a break-through novel. It'd be very hard to do the same kind of fiction again if after two or three books they hadn't really made much of an impact. You do often find authors swapping publishers and then it'll be re-presented as their break-through book.

**VA: Do you think that's because a publisher finds it easier to say 'our new author' rather than 'a new debut author'?**

JS: Isla Dewar was published by Headline for a long time and she sold well north of the border but didn't ever quite make the impact that she should have done. She's a really good mid-list writer. One of her books was filmed with Helena Bonham-Carter. I don't think the film did particularly well, unfortunately. Ebury have just bought her and are re-presenting her. That's great – that she hasn't lost a publisher altogether – because so many writers who've maybe had ten novels out can't find a publisher for their eleventh.

**VA: So if the brand doesn't work you have to do a drastic re-branding?**

JS: For that kind of mid-list writer – the backbone of the publishing industry you would have thought, at one point – it's just not working.

**VA: And if they need to cut somebody that's who they'll cut?**

JS: Yes.

**VA: What a pity.**

JS: I know. One editor said to me – she must be in her late fifties – I'm so glad I entered publishing when I did. And that she's finishing her career at the time she is. There will be new ways, we just haven't quite got them sorted yet. It's not going to disappear – new writers are still going to come through and there will still be brilliant ones. It's just going to be a bit tougher for a little while.

**VA: Something the music industry has found with illegal downloads and so forth is that the majority of bands are making their money from associated merchandising: rather than CD sales it's gigs—live shows—and that aspect of live performance being something which can't actually be replicated on the internet. Do you think that there's a path there for authors?**

JS: I think there's definitely a path with the right kind of events but it won't be so much in terms of ticket sales or fees. The standard fee for an appearance in Scotland is one hundred and fifty pounds. But with, for example, The Gathering: they sell thousands of books in one afternoon at The Gathering, but that's a certain kind of book which appeals to the American tourists who came.

**VA: You used to be director of the Edinburgh Book Festival. Did you find that authors sold many books at the book events they appeared at there?**

JS: Yes, normally they would do, but it would be quite expensive for the publishers to bring the books there and to set up a bookshop for two weeks. The growth of literary festivals certainly introduces new writers to audiences all over so they are a really good thing but they're not a substitute...

**VA: For actually sitting and reading the book yourself?**

JS: Yes. Or for authors actually selling lots of books through bookshops.

**VA: In your view what do authors need for the future, to keep them going?**

JS: They probably do need a day job unless they're very successful. They need some other streams of income because it's going to be very, very hard for them since the advances have gone down. What else? For a literary writer it's very different than for a commercial writer. A commercial writer has to have that eye on the ball for what's happening, what's selling, what trends are out there. For a literary writer it's quite different because you've got to write what you want to write: it has to be readable and all the rest of it – and good – but there's no point in trying to hook on to a trend which is going to be over by the time you've finished your book.

**VA: Is there anything else you'd like to add?**

JS: Anything else about the short story? I do think that Radio 4 – how they've promoted that prize – is brilliant. It's great having the *Front Row* interview the day before and that they allowed the stories to be as long as they needed to be. Sara's occupied nearly half an hour on the radio – fantastic – rather than being squeezed into a fifteen minute slot. They really did it in a stellar way.

**VA: The stories were on Listen Again, they were available as Podcasts as well. It was very accessible.**

JS: Very accessible. I've had loads of email for Sara from people who listened to it. The response has been very, very good for the stories on the whole. I hope Radio 4 will continue that. It'll be really interesting to see how the Sunday Times do it.

**VA: How they manage to have associated tie-ins and marketing?**

JS: Yes. *The Scotsman* would always commission George Mackay Brown to write a Christmas story for the paper. That was a lovely opportunity for readers who probably had a bit more time than normal to read a story by a leading Scottish writer at Christmas. That doesn't happen any more because the papers are so badly resourced.

**VA: The Sandy McCall-Smith 44 Scotland Street serialisation has been hugely popular. As a book it sold loads of copies despite the fact that people have essentially already read it and had their free version, which shows it can still be a success. Why do you think there's no fiction hugely featured in the broadsheets any more?**

JS: *The Guardian* sometimes do a summer fiction special—which I think is great—in their weekend bit. But they just don't feel it sells enough copies. It would cost them money to commission and if they can fill the space with something cheaper they will. There was a fantastic editor on one of the Irish dailies and every Saturday he would have short fiction – Ireland has been a very strong market for short stories in the past, they've also sold a lot of anthologies – I don't know if he retired or if the newspaper changed direction but again it's not as strong as it was. Maybe with e-books and with iPods it'll give us another opportunity.



**VA: Thank you very much.**

## Interview 2: Dr Ailsa Cox

Interviewed by Victoria Adams (via email), 26 January 2010

**VA: The launch of the Edge Hill short story prize in 2007 seems to have been strongly motivated by a desire to raise the profile and prestige of the individual author short story collection. Please could you say a little about why you felt such a prize was necessary, and if you saw it as a peculiarly British problem, or symptomatic of an international diffidence towards short fiction? Why for a collection rather than a single story?**

AC: After the success of the first one day short story conference at Edge Hill in 2006, I was approached by the university about the possibility of a prize. At that point, Edge Hill had only recently acquired full university status, and was eager to raise its public profile. A prestigious literary prize was one way to do that. There are numerous prizes for short stories, big ones like the Bridport and small local contests, and I also wanted to do something different. To be honest, I was also nervous about the logistics of an open prize which would bring in thousands of entries. We also had to differentiate ourselves from the National Short Story Prize which had just been launched. I had a think about it, and a chat with Ra Page of Comma Press, who suggested a prize for a published collection. The idea was that this was something which might have a direct impact on publishers; it would encourage them to publish collections, which have been traditionally regarded as second-best to a novels. This meant it was absolutely unique in the UK.

The British suffer from a chronic lack of self-esteem, and are always comparing themselves unfavourably with other countries. Most short story criticism has been American, and it is sometimes regarded as ‘their’ national form. They do have some prizes with a status that the Edge Hill Prize aspires to (for instance the Rea Award). However if you talk to US short story writers and critics they also feel that they are an embattled minority (see Charles May’s blog for instance). I don’t think the problem is peculiarly British, but the lack of something like a British *New Yorker* magazine has made it seem so; stories have been published in small circulation presses but not appeared regularly in influential newspapers or magazines.

**VA: The Edge Hill short story prize remains the only competition in the UK for the best short story collection by a single author, but this year Alice Munro won the Man Booker, and Claire Armitstead called 2009 ‘the year of the short story’ when she awarded Petina Gappah the Guardian First Book Award for her short story collection, *Elegy for Easterly*. What changes have you noticed in industry attitudes towards short fiction since founding the prize?**

AC: British and Irish short story collections are now reviewed regularly on literary pages. Short stories also appear more often in newspaper supplements - for instance, the *Sunday Times* magazine publishes one every week (and has also launched a big-money prize for a

single short story). This is all good. However I don't always feel the work published in newspapers necessarily represents the best contemporary short story writing. I'm disappointed that we see a lot of work by writers who are primarily novelists and have not really made the form their own; and a lot of 'undiscovered till now' minor works from the attics of dead authors. So there is some way to go in making the general reader see the short story as an innovative and accessible form in its own right. There seem to be a lot of themed anthologies from leading writers, such as Oxfam's *Ox Tales*. This is not exactly 'the industry' but I have noticed academic publishers are producing more students guides and surveys of the short story.

**VA: The majority of short story collections in Britain are published through independent presses rather than the larger publishing houses. Why do you think this is? Does it have any effect on the quality of the collections produced?**

AC: Most of the big 'literary' publishers will put out one collection, sometimes two, a year. They will usually be by a big name novelist such as Anne Enright or Ali Smith (both shortlisted last year). These writers tend to be at the top of their game - they are experienced, they are confident, they are full time writers - so they will inevitably dominate a shortlist. In the past large publishers have published so few collections because they were perceived as being unpopular with the reading public. This may have changed, but the issue is complicated by current pressures on any sort of literary publishing, and by the dominance of reading groups who (it is said) like books with social issues they can discuss. Short stories engage with the mysterious and elliptical; they are not morally improving! Independent presses are usually run by writers. Writers like short stories because they are virtuoso writing; they push at the boundaries of form and style. Therefore small publishers publish more collections, many of them as good as the big-hitters I mentioned earlier, some more uneven but nearly always striking and memorable. Faber do a great job backing the short story with collections that are not from people known as novelists; they are a large publisher but also independent, and are closely associated with poetry, so perhaps that explains it. Claire Keegan is one of theirs, and also some writers who narrowly missed being shortlisted for the Edge Hill Prize

**VA: In your opinion, how important is the ordering of short stories in a collection, and what effect does the order have on the reader?**

AC: It is very important. You have to start with a striking story or lose the reader. You also have to strike a balance between establishing a style, a signature, a usp; and, on the other hand, the impression that you are narrow in scope, and only have one story to tell. So there is a battle between variety and consistency in the ordering of a collection. A collection is not cumulative, like a novel, and not everyone will read the stories in the order in which they are printed, but it's still important to strike the right note in the final story.

**VA: What roles do you think the title of a collection and the titles of the individual stories play for the reader? In your experience, are they chosen by the author or editor?**

AC: The title is really important, more so than the titles of individual stories. Anne Enright's *Taking Pictures* became *Yesterday's Weather* in paperback. The second title is better because it's more intriguing and also because you can get mixed up between 'taking' and 'talking'. The title doesn't even have to have anything obvious to do with content. I don't know myself whether they are chosen mostly by the author or the editor; I chose the title of mine, *The Real Louise*, by giving writer friends a list of the contents. I realised, too late, I should have written stories with snazzier titles!

**VA: My research suggests that, in Britain, a growing number of linked short story collections have been marketed as novels, and possibly re-ordered and edited to suit a novel-reading audience. As both an enthusiastic teacher, researcher, writer and reader of short fiction, what are your views on this?**

AC: I think this is a terrible shame, but not a surprise to me. It's been going on since Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971).

**VA: Novels which are described as 'postmodern', 'fragmented', or 'multi-faceted' narratives often have a lot in common with the structure of a short story collection. What advantages do you think novel-writers can take from mimicking the effects of a collection?**

AC: There is an obvious practical advantage; novelists can write their books in segments that can then be fitted together rather than sustaining a mood or a style for the long haul. Present day culture changes so rapidly it's hard to do that, even if you do have long stretches of uninterrupted writing at your disposal. These 'fragmented' narratives are often divided between voices; the writer is able to exploit that in this form (e.g. Douglas Coupland's *Hey Nostradamus!*; Ali Smith's *The Accidental*). They're also good at suggesting a community or interconnectedness (David Mitchell, *Ghostwritten*; Kate Atkinson, *Case Histories*) - a connectedness which is fragile, but nonetheless there.

**VA: There has been a massive rise in the number of creative writing courses in the UK in the last few years. A large number of these focus on short stories when teaching prose: In your opinion, has this affected the composition of novels by British writers?**

AC: It has certainly helped create a market for the short story. Possibly, yes - but I suspect that the bigger influence has been American prose writers in both the short story and then novel. There is a tendency amongst British novelists to produce something I always call 'deathless prose', ponderous, ruminative, written in 'good' English. American writers are more likely to use an immediate, pared down, colloquial style - whether it's in

the short story or the novel; and to find ways of being fresh and inventive without lapsing into whimsical 'magic realism'.

**VA: Do you think that the growing digital publishing industry will change how we read? In your view, what does this mean for the future of the book and will it change how people write?**

AC: The short story has already benefited from digital culture through ezines and through the opportunities offered for networking and book promotion on the web. In the early 90s there were some interesting experiments in hypertext by people like Michael Joyce - forms of writing which are also forms of visual art. Robert Coover said that electronic literature was the future, the book was dead, and a lot of discussions and projects were launched which have now disappeared into the ether. Cyberspace is in some respects even more transitory than the printed book, which, as we know, goes out of print overnight, and drops to bits in your hand. I think there is nothing new under the sun and that the changes we predict are not the ones that are going to happen.

More and more people are writing and fewer are reading. Any creative writing teacher will tell you as much. Even amongst my MA students, the first point of reference is TV or film; if I say *The Time Traveller's Wife* they think I mean the film, not the book. But every mass culture creates its vocal minority, the counterculture, so I am not entirely curmudgeonly (and in some respects I think the influence of film on prose fiction is good, particularly in relation to the image)

**VA: Is there anything you would like to add?**

AC: This is partly to do with digital culture - I think we are coming to a point when generic boundaries cease to matter so much. A story is a story whether you tell it as a song or short fiction or a digital installation, or all three; in end, who cares if something is a short story sequence or a novel? Or a long story or novella? When I started my research into the short story everyone was obsessed with definition but now we are confident enough to care about that. We know a story when we see one!

### Interview 3 – Sarah Hall

Interviewed by Victoria Adams (via email), 11 May 2010

**VA: *How To Paint a Dead Man* represents a structural departure for your writing, compared to your previous novels, due to its multi-faceted narration. At the R3 Free Thinking Festival in October, you spoke of the different voices of the novel as having flowed naturally in sequence, rather than having sat down and decided to write a multi-viewpoint book. What was it that kept you going, rather than stopping after the first or second sections were written and publishing as a novella? Likewise, would you consider publishing the sections separately, as individual short stories?**

SH: Haweswater, my first novel, was structurally multiform as well – a series of vignettes using both present and past tenses. I'm not sure, so early in my career, and having hopefully ranged across various styles and subject matters, what constitutes a departure or doesn't. What kept me going in each of the four HTPADM stories was an interest in each of the voices and narrative torques. All my novels, because they are written in an intuitive fashion as well as being planned, feel like inquiries into the subjects they deal with. If an author feels like they are part of an investigative mission perhaps it serves to maintain curiosity, surprise, and therefore early-stage interest in the project at hand. It was quite difficult to know what I had on my hands in the early stages though – what the matter /text/material I was generating would eventually evolve into. I felt with this novel particularly that I was dealing with very large existential themes – life, death, sex, art, human commemoration and meaning. During composition I had to trust that this philosophical basis was forming the chassis for a large body of work, with four separately turning wheels to make the thing move, if you like. The latter stories – Peter's and Annette's - felt more focussed in a way – having been foreshadowed by certain metaphysical themes and plot structures in Giorgio's and Susan's stories. I would not have considered publishing the sections separately and they certainly do not qualify as short stories, which are technically very different entities. I think the stories lend themselves to fragmentation and splicing – it benefits and builds the drama to move in and out of each. Contrastingly, a novel such as Damon Galgut's *In A Strange Room* really is a brilliant example of three previously published novellas, running separately, put together to form a novel.

**VA: The connections between the different sections of *How To Paint A Dead Man* vary from drifting characters, tangible objects moving through time, themes and geographical location. Once you'd finished writing the individual sections, did you edit them to consciously bring out these connections, and how do you see these connections affecting the reader as they move through the book?**

SH: I think as readers and as human beings we are pattern-making and pattern-finding creatures. We draw satisfaction from this, whether or not there is artificiality to it. But

there are also difficult and cold coincidences and empty meaningless spaces that we have to contend with and reconcile ourselves to. I suppose the idea for this book was to somehow represent all that and in a balanced way – it seemed like a more naturalistic portrait of life to do so. As readers, particularly contemporary British readers, we are perhaps used to neatly manufactured endings and narrative solvency in literature. It's a risk not to provide that. But, conversely, perhaps it is more satisfying to let a reader draw his or her own patterns and meanings from a lightly linked text, and for the end statement to be one of insolvency. There was a lot of editing to this novel. At one point I thought perhaps there needed to be more definite tie-ins between the four stories, but the result was a very contrived and forced version of the book, so I stripped that architecture and apparatus back out and it's a better novel for it. Most of the editing work was done in relation to the interior self-contained worlds of each story. And then it was done in the integration and organization of chapters – for this I used a film-making *beat sheet* method - so that, although a variety of things was going on at the same time in the four pieces, there might also be complementary arcs in themes and tensions, sexual exchanges, dramas and philosophical conversations across the four. My hope is that each chapter offers help, context, or a philosophical chime/communication, for the reading of future chapters.

**VA: The different narrative voices are identified by consistent section titles: 'The Mirror Crisis' (A), 'Translated from the Bottle Journals' (B), 'The Fool on the Hill' (C) and 'The Divine Vision of Annette Tambroni' (D). What role do you see the titles of the individual sections playing in *How To Paint A Dead Man*?**

SH: The titles are, I suppose, identifiers, ways of marking whose world, whose story, we are about to re-enter or re-gain each time we get to a new chapter. They also summarize what is happening in each story and they give each story its own literary distinction. Titles are very important to me – I like the idea of them in relation to original production, art works and even seduction tools.

**VA: The intercuts are organised in a repeating ABCD pattern until the very end, where it breaks into BCADBCA, ending on an extract from *The Craftman's Handbook*. What prompted your decision to intercut the narratives, and how did you decide on the order they were placed in, particularly at the end of the book?**

SH: The altered splicing towards the end of the novel has to do with the drama going on in each story and the maintaining of tension. It also shakes up the proceedings – as each character is really being shaken up within their own territory. I wanted Susan's narrative to bookend the novel though - it seemed right to open and close with it – hers is a resonant contemporary story, which perhaps puts the 'older' stories into context somehow, or uses a modern prism to view the content, relevance and ideas within them. It's also, word for word, the longest story of the four, and it is through Susan's 'current' anxiety about how to live and her identity crisis, her bereavement and intimate confessions, that we springboard into investigating the philosophical questions behind the

book, the communal as well as the private nature of art and existence. All the characters might be said to ‘transcend’ somehow at the end of their stories, but Susan’s transcendence is less metaphorical, less extraordinary than the others, and so perhaps it is closer to the experiences of our daily lives. I don’t know if this book is supposed to be a companion piece of some kind, I do feel it has a companionable quality, and I think that becomes quite clear in the final passages of Susan’s story, where the second person narration, as well as being Susan’s mode of communication, serves as an address, an inclusion, to and for the reader.

**VA: What was behind your decision to include the extract from *The Craftsman’s Handbook* at the end of the novel? Do you see it as being a part of the main text, or an extra?**

SH: HTPADM is a book that has a lot of discussion and lessons in it – about art and life - at least the four main characters ask a lot of questions and talk a lot about these things! I love the Craftsman’s Handbook for its pragmatic approach to art production and its general advice for artists – on comportment, discipline, mentorship etc. The section on How To Paint A Dead Man is quite bizarre, so practical, and yet something in there is almost metaphorical - you use the same colours as for a living person, just darken them etc. This passage to me is like a portal into one of the most important and leading things behind western art – namely death, the big black void, and how we reconcile ourselves to our mortal state. It felt like an operating key for the writing of the book, and seemed absolutely fitting therefore to include it at the end of the novel.

**VA: In the last year or so, in several interviews you’ve mentioned that you are working on a collection of short stories. How do you feel that *How To Paint A Dead Man* has been influenced by working on the collection?**

SH: If looked at the other way round, I’m not sure HTPADM has influenced the stories. Again, I think what the four sections of prose do in the novel is reveal themselves to be very different entities to short stories, perhaps looser entities which are dependent on each other for greater meaning and enlivenment, so if anything I can use them to steer away from when it comes to short story writing, in order to move towards the tighter, more exacting form. Writing short stories over the years may have helped to hone some skills with which to guide the plots of each of the four sections in HTPADM. But I think essentially, this is a novel, with novelistic DNA, and should be regarded as such.

**VA: Did you find a difference between writing in distinct sections rather than one complete narrative?**

SH: All novel writing experiences are different, and are not necessarily smooth or continuous drafting experiences, so the answer would be yes. The stories are distinct but they are also porous, or choral – in order to work with each other and create an overall. I have written other novels with separate ‘strands’ - eg Haweswater – so had experienced



this style of multi-narrative before, in a lighter fashion. This latest project still felt like grappling with something enormous, a massive world unto itself, even while it contained smaller worlds. There was a point when the editing stage felt, perhaps, easier than previous works – during the ‘polishing’ of the four stories. Working on just a quarter of the novel at a time felt quite nice! But then the macro-management stage – the fitting of it all together and ‘polishing’ the whole, was, cognitively, structurally and physically (pages all over the floor), very difficult, and required a higher level of organization than I had employed before. But again, every novel has smooth and hard stages!

**VA: In an interview for [www.readysteadybook.com](http://www.readysteadybook.com) you described the literary industry as ‘mad as a bowl of frogs’. How do you see your writing being influenced by factors such as the dominance of the Sales & Marketing department in commissioning decisions?**

SH: Not in the slightest. My writing is influenced by my literary preoccupations and a sense of working within an unquantifiable reading community that is endlessly surprising and open-minded. My writing decisions have never been commissioned.

**VA: Do you think that the growing digital publishing industry will change how we read, and what does this mean for the future of your books?**

SH: I don’t know. I’m not sure anyone does for sure.

**VA: Is there anything you would like to add?**

SH: No thanks.

## Interview 4: Tania Hershman

Interviewed by Victoria Adams (via email), 15 January 2010

**VA: When you founded *The Short Review* in 2007, you explained your motivation as: ‘it’s not so easy to find reviews of short story collections, especially ones published by small presses. They just don’t get the column inches that novels receive. It’s no wonder they don’t sell as well as novels - or that publishers think readers don’t want to read short stories.’ Do you see this as a peculiarly British problem, or is it symptomatic of an international diffidence towards short fiction?**

TH: At that time I was based in Israel, so only read English-language newspapers online, and these tended to be British newspapers, so perhaps it was, but I can’t really comment on that. I would need to have done a wider review of the newspapers. The feeling I got, though, was that authors of short story collections were struggling to get reviewed. Now that I spend quite a lot of time looking for links to other reviews of every book we review, I can see that in no small number of instances our review of a particular collection is the only review it has had. In other cases, short story collections are getting reviewed on blogs, probably quite a few of them blogs run by friends of the author. I don’t say this in any way to disparage, blog reviews have become more and more important and influential. But it is also acknowledge that blogger reviewers tend to only review what they like, and newspapers etc... might have a wider spread of more critical reviews. At the Short Review, I encourage my reviewers to review a book that they didn’t love, as long as there is something positive they can say about it.

Anyhow, over the past two and a half years I haven’t seen the situation get better: it is still a noteworthy moment when a newspaper anywhere singles out a short story collection, or more than one. From what I see in the US, local newspapers will review or feature local authors, including short story authors, which is wonderful.

**VA: Alice Munro won the Man Booker this year, and Claire Armitstead called 2009 ‘the year of the short story’ when she awarded Petina Gappah the Guardian First Book Award for her short story collection, *Elegy for Easterly*. What changes have you noticed in industry attitudes towards short fiction since founding *The Short Review*?**

TH: My first comment must be to say that one of the Man Booker judges did say when they awarded Alice Munro the prize something to the effect of “even though she only writes short stories”... which did rather dilute it for me. Can’t find the exact quote, sorry. I get asked this a lot, have there been industry changes, and I say that I haven’t noticed any changes in the world of mainstream publishing, big name literary agents, broadsheet publications. Until publishers are shoving novelists aside in their dash towards the next hot short story author, I won’t believe talk of changes – in this sphere.

But in that place, that world, where short stories have always flourished, the place you have to seek out, where small presses and literary magazines exist, the short story is

alive, well and kicking vigorously. There are more literary magazines than ever, and more small presses, publishing short stories because they love them, for little or no profit. These pioneers have taken up the gauntlet. No, not all the literary magazines are high quality and selective, neither are the small presses, but I read more than 40 stories every month in books and magazines and the majority are breath-takingly good. There are so many excellent stories being published, it's a shame people who love to read don't know about them.

And there is still this attitude, which I find utterly puzzling, that short stories aren't as satisfying to read as a novel. To compare one to the other is idiotic, that's like comparing a sonnet to a TV program. I said in an article I recently wrote that there is almost a sense that if you admit to loving short stories you will be castigated for your lack of some kind of stamina, that you can't hack anything longer. This has not changed.

**VA: One of the questions generally asked of short story writers in the interview section of *The Short Review* is: 'How did you choose which stories to include and in what order?'. In your opinion, how important is the ordering of short stories in a collection, and what effect does the order have on the reader? How did you choose the order of the stories in *The White Road and Other Stories*?**

TH: I read at least one collection a month and I tend to read them straight through and then, if I am reviewing the book, read the collection again in a different order, to see what this illuminates. To ask how important the order is is a very hard question to answer without doing some kind of trial where people read one collection with the stories in a different order! Everyone reads differently, everyone likes different things. It's exactly like a record album, you can't please everyone.

However, I was asked to endorse a collection last year and I noticed that the author had grouped several "similar" stories in terms of having a English young male protagonist together, whereas the rest of the stories were set in various countries with different protagonists and that didn't sit well with me so I suggested he split them up.

With my book, I must admit that I couldn't do it myself, I got my partner to put them in order. He printed them all out and laid all 27 stories on the dining table and shuffled them around. I knew I wanted to have flash stories interspersed between the longer stories, as a kind of "palate-cleanser" perhaps. He arranged them so that the first and last stories had some resonance – *The White Road* and *North Cold* both deal with weather and extreme cold. Then he made sure that adjacent pieces weren't dealing with the same topics as he saw them. I think he did well. I really couldn't have done it.

It's always interesting to hear what the authors we interview for the Short Review say about ordering their collections. They have all sorts of reasons why they are done the way they are, but the reviewers rarely comment on the order. Every reader will read in a different way, that's the beauty of short stories. The author may think one story is about a particular topic, but the reader will read it as being about something else.

**VA: What roles do you think the title of a collection and the titles of the individual stories play for the reader? In your experience, are they chosen by the author or editor?**

TH: I have never heard of an editor choosing titles of individual stories, but I don't know about the collection title, perhaps they do. I often puzzle over the title of a collection, especially if it is not one of the titles of the stories in the book. For example, Roy Kesey's collection is called *All Over*, and there is no story named that in the book. I really like this, it added another dimension: is it "it's all over" as in "it's finished", or "all over" as in "everywhere"? I like to try and peek inside the author's mind, I feel like they are giving me clues.

As for individual story titles, they are absolutely vital, they can completely change the meaning of the story, or provide meaning for a story which is more experimental. I think every writer needs to be aware of the critical importance of titles. They are the first thing to grab a reader's attention and if they are good, the reader will read more of a story than they might otherwise. And as opposed to a longer work, short stories rarely appear in isolation. They are either in a literary magazine or a collection, which means that if the reader isn't compelled to keep reading, he or she knows there is something they might like more and they will move on. Not so in a book-length work, where a reader, I think, will give the work much more time to impress. So: a short story has to grab and hold on from the beginning and the title is the first impression, it is absolutely critical.

**VA: One of the categories on *The Short Review* is labelled 'Novel-in-stories / linked short stories'. Could you tell me a little more about what kind of books you envisage as being classified by this category?**

TH: What falls under this category is a collection of stories about the same character or set of characters, but where each story could stand alone. A reader doesn't need to have read an earlier story in order to enjoy a later one. This is what differentiates this kind of book from a novel. Also, there could be a different kind of link, as with Ali Smith's *Hotel World*, where the stories are linked by a place, here the hotel, or all set in the same town. *Olive Kittredge* by Elizabeth Strout is an example of linked short stories, where Olive, if she is not in a particular story, is at least mentioned. I am hard pressed to define the difference between a novel-in-stories and linked short stories, I think perhaps the linked short stories may have a more tenuous link. Also, I think this is a marketing tool, that authors are somehow persuaded to call their books a novel-in-stories to woo those who don't think they like short stories!

**VA: The majority of short story collections in Britain are published through independent presses rather than the larger publishing houses. Why do you think this is? Does it have any effect on the quality of the collections produced?**

TH: To be honest, I have always and continue to find the attitude of the larger publishing houses to short stories utterly unfathomable. It seem to me to be a self-perpetuating myth:

publishers don't publish many short story collections, so not many get reviewed, so even less are bought, so publishers publish less of them. It takes a "brave" publisher to break this cycle, to say to their publicity and marketing people: You guys are very talented, so let's put as much muscle behind this short story collection as we do behind the novels we push. I can't understand why this doesn't happen. A short story collection lends itself so well to innovative marketing ideas – one beautifully-designed and printed short story given away free with some kind of item relevant to the stories, a story for the iPhone, etc... It is much more satisfying when an author reads a complete short story at a book event than excerpts from a novel. I have seen some encouraging signs, such as a new collection coming out from Random House in the US, who are producing a "sampler" of a few of the stories which will be distributed in advance. And Canongate commissioned animated films to accompany the re-release of Dan Rhodes' short short story collection, *Anthropology*.

But I must stress here that it is more difficult now to get published by a larger publisher at all, whether you are writing novels, novellas, short stories or poetry. The climate is very tough right now, that's what I hear from my novelist friends. Publishers want to emulate what has sold in the past, they won't necessarily take risks on something new, innovative.

Which is where small independent presses step in, and have stepped in. They seem much more able and willing to take risks, perhaps because they aren't dependent on sales, because they don't assume they will earn that much from sales. I don't know. All I have seen is that these presses are run by extremely dedicated and hard-working individuals, who do it very much out of love, because they find writers who *should* be out there and they do what they can to make this a reality. I am immensely grateful for this. Without Salt Publishing, from what the agent I had at the time had been saying, I would not have found a deal. It is still the situation, a lot of people tell me, where larger publishers say "Give us a novel first and then we might publish your collection." To me, this is like saying to a poet, Write a stage play and then we'll talk. It doesn't make sense to try and get people to do something which isn't necessarily what they do best, what they love. Thank god for the independent presses! And no, I don't think it has any effect on the quality. I read many independent-press-published collections and they are, for the most part, astonishingly good. The editors are as sharp-eyed and in some ways more involved than those in larger houses who have a longer list and less time to devote. Independent presses might be seen as doing what mainstream publishers used to do, before it all got too commercially-focussed.

**VA: My research suggests that, in Britain, a growing number of linked short story collections have been marketed as novels, and possibly re-ordered and edited to suit a novel-reading audience. What are your views of this?**

TH: This is all, of course, down to the marketing department. Writers write whatever they write, and the marketing people package it in the way they feel they can sell it. I heard Janice Galloway read at the Small Wonder festival last September, and she said her publishers decided that her last book was a memoir. She said she hadn't thought while she

was writing, Ah, this is a memoir, she just wrote and it wasn't her job to package it. On the one hand I say, anything that gets people reading short story collections in whatever guise is a good thing – but the other part of me says, What a shame if they don't realise they are reading a short story collection! You can't make a collection of short stories into a novel, I don't think, or vice versa – they are such different creatures, with different aims and purposes. But then, I'm not in marketing!

**VA: Novels which are described as 'postmodern', 'fragmented', or 'multi-faceted' narratives often have a lot in common with the structure of a short story collection. What advantages do you think novel-writers can take from mimicking the effects of a collection?**

TH: Well, I have never written a novel but I do like to read postmodern-type novels. I might imagine that novel-writers would feel perhaps less constrained if they mimicked a collection, in terms of being “allowed” to make huge leaps in time, or to move from one character to another. I really don't know. It's an interesting question, but I have never heard of a novelist wanted to mimic a short story collection, given the current attitude to short stories in the mainstream media.

**VA: Do you think that the growing digital publishing industry will change how we read? In your view, what does this mean for the future of the book and will it change how people write?**

TH: Another interesting question. What is fascinating to me with the growth of the Internet is that when I recently compiled a list on my blog of UK and Irish literary magazines, firstly I found many more than I had imagined (103 and counting) and, second, many more of them are print magazines. This indicates something I think we all know: there is nothing quite as satisfying as reading a printed document, and being published in a print magazine or a book still has more kudos than online. I don't think this will change, I think digital publishing will enhance the industry rather than take over, just as television didn't spell the end of radio. The wonderful aspect to being published online is that it is much easier to share with many readers; whether a single story or an eBook, its reach is far further. I don't think we have begun seeing how the traditional publishers exploit the digital publishing – especially when it comes to short stories, but as e-readers become cheaper, better quality and more ubiquitous, I imagine we will see something rather more creative – animated short stories, for example? Audio and written word together?

**VA: On the website for your collection, *The White Road and Other Stories*, you describe a great short story as 'a slap in the face'. In your opinion, how does short fiction differ from long fiction?**

TH: Short stories can do something that just isn't sustainable in longer fiction, for the most part. They can ask the reader to fill in far larger gaps than a reader might be willing to fill in in a novel, say. A great short story, for me, makes the reader work – and in this way the reader becomes engaged and involved, rather than just watching. Short stories can be urgent and intense, and because the experience of reading them is an intense one, taking place during the time it takes to drink a cup of tea, this can leave an enormous impact on a reader. I often feel physically shaken by a great short story. I think the time investment in a longer work necessarily dilutes the intensity of the reading experience – which is how it probably should be!

**VA: You've suggested that 2010 should be the year for flash fiction. Please can you say a little about the difference between flash fiction and other forms of fiction? How is flash fiction affected by being published in collections, rather than as individual pieces?**

TH: I am trying to spread the word in the hope that it will happen! Everything I said above about short fiction goes 100-fold for flash fiction, which is only a few pages long and sometimes as short as 50 words. A definition of flash fiction might be that it leaves out far more than it includes. Almost everything is between the lines. The flash fiction I love to read and to write is surreal, magical, odd, playing with words. It is somewhere between a poem and a short story, and writers of flash fiction often feel even freer to experiment, to ask more of the reader, to ask them to step into bizarre worlds just for this brief space of time.

I used to think flash collections couldn't work, and then I read several excellent ones where, as with all great short story collections, I had to put the book down after reading each story, just to absorb what I had just read. I experimented in my book with alternating between longer stories and flash fiction – and this divided opinion amongst reviewers. I am not sure I would do that again. I have gathered a collection of my flash fiction, and like to think of it as almost a poetry collection, with the same thought that goes into ordering the poems. Reading flash is a different experience to reading anything else, and perhaps an introduction to a collection might help the reader.

**VA: Is there anything you would like to add?**

TH: I don't think so!

## Appendix C

1. Leah
2. Jacob
3. Erica



## 1. Leah

### 13<sup>th</sup> INFORMS Applied Probability Conference July 6-8, 2005, Ottawa, Canada

**Cluster:** Applied Probability Sessions

**Session Information:** Wednesday Jul 06, 14:15 – 15: 45

**Title:** Random Graphs and Applications

**Chair:** TBC

**Title:** The Role of the Family in ad hoc Networks

**Presenting Author:** Leah Beaufort, Postdoc, Microsoft Research, 7 Thomson Avenue, Cambridge CB3 0FB, United Kingdom, [l.beaufort3@cam.ac.uk](mailto:l.beaufort3@cam.ac.uk)

**Abstract:** In this paper I take a Bayesian approach to Scott L. Feld’s Friendship Paradox, extending the notion that for almost every person, that person’s friends have more friends than they do into the field of inter-familial probabilities – that for almost every person, that person’s relatives will have more relatives than they do.

While Feld’s paradox is explained by the social dynamics of popularity clustering, I shall determine whether my theory of ‘generalised relativity’ does indeed function as a paradox – potentially explainable by a genetic extension of social network popularities – or whether it is a dynamic pattern of recurrent development determined by an expanding world population.

As I shall demonstrate through retrospective bias confirmation, the impact of belief on the likelihood of an event on the probability of that event occurring is directly related to the amount of contact sustained between perceived members of a family network. In the test case under analysis, Subject A has had zero contact with biological relatives beyond her own daughter and has experienced minimal interaction between extended networks of an adopted ‘family’. This paper charts the affect likelihoods of both managed and un-managed contact between Subject A and both biological and non-biological familial networks.

## 2. Jacob

*Notes for Speech- 10 August 2008*

- Knowing he was going to be arrested, St. Lawrence sold church property – sacred vessels, tapestries, jewels – and gave all profits to the poor of Rome. When brought before the prefect and ordered to give up the treasures of the church, St. Lawrence presented the poor, the crippled, the blind and the suffering, calling them the true treasure of the church. I feel honoured to be able to stand here today and announce that all profits from today's barbeque will be going to the St. Lawrence Trust. They're doing some fabulous things out there and I hope you'll stop in on the display marquee before you leave and look at some of the artwork the children have been producing during their Sunday Sessions. Inspirational.
- It is said that as St. Lawrence was being roasted alive, he said *Assum est, inquit, versa et manduca* or 'This side's done, turn me over and have a bite.' [wait for laughter]. Which is why he's the patron saint of comedians. Seriously though, folks, a big round of applause for today's entertainment from Larry Gestalt. Business cards available at the ticket desk on the way out, if you want to hire him for a hen night or a bar mitzvah.
- St. Lawrence is also patron saint of librarians and I'd like to join me in thanking all of the library staff for volunteering their time and effort to make today such a complete success. And now the head of our Board, Lady Cecelia Mountford, would like to say a few words.

### 3. Erica

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19 June 2001

Dear Mrs Erica Gordonstoun

Thank you for your kind letter of 14/02/2001 which Kitty read with interest. Unfortunately she is unable to both deal with the extreme volume of correspondence she receives and continue writing such books as *Curse in a Dead Man's Eye* and *Petticoats in Portugal* – as an ardent fan I'm sure you can appreciate her predicament!!! She has asked me to write to thank you and to reassure you that she is hard at work on her latest novel – *Mother's Mayhem* – due to be published in early 2002.

For more news on Kitty's activities, why not check out our new website – [www.kittypwritesforme.co.uk](http://www.kittypwritesforme.co.uk) – and read Kitty's exciting blog posts on the whirlwind activities of Britain's foremost romantic writer and ardent bookophile, including exclusive content such as the free audio download of Kitty's award winning short story 'From the Ashes of His Heart'.

Keep reading and remember – Kitty P Writes For You™ merchandise is available from our online store, just the click of a button away!! The perfect gift for the Kitty Patterson fan in your life.

Warmest regards,

Livvi Reynolds  
(intern, Puddle & Hunt Literary Agents)